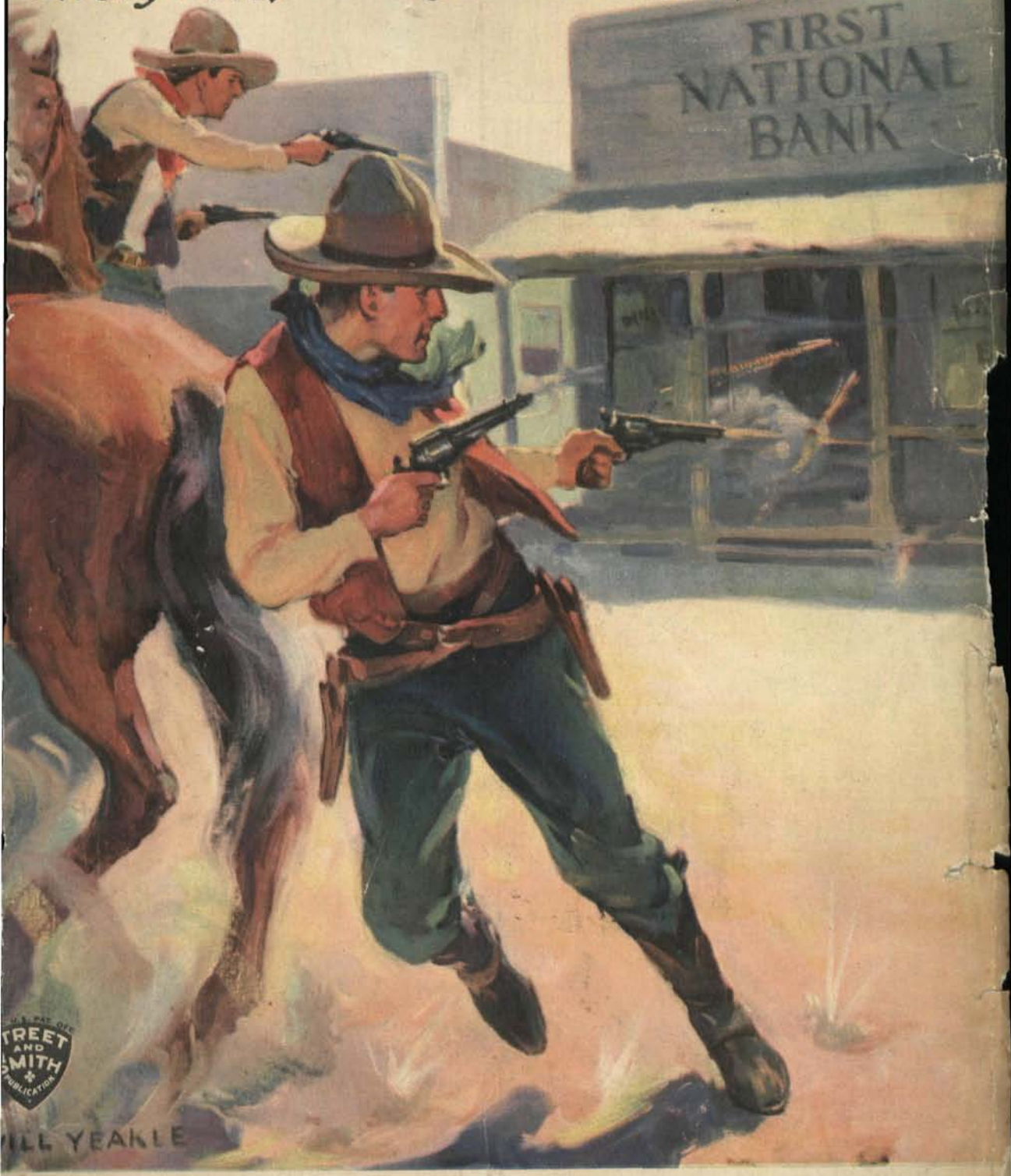
Western Story Magazine

Every Week

Nov. 2, 1929

15¢ 20¢ IN CANADA



Shooting their way clear, they snatched a pair of horses and rode into the hills. from THE DUSTER By MAX BRAND

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In Next Week's Issue of WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

TWO BRONCHOS
By George Owen Baxter

Introducing Tom Gloster, thoughtful, brave, considerate, whose nobility of character is taken for stupidity by his grasping family. Baxter has given his story a novel background, and an unusual boy adds flavor to a yarn that gets off to a good start.

SHINING DEER
By Seth Ranger

Alert ears and delicate scent alike search for threatening danger. Ahead? Behind? On either side? The forest is alive!

IDAHO, GO SLOW
By Hugh F. Grinstead

"Idaho" got a complete outfit, false whiskers, beard, and so on. Now all he had to do was some observin' and thinkin'—regular detective stuff.

Also Features by

Robert J. Horton
Howard E. Morgan
Ray Humphreys
And Others

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At All News Stands

In This Week's Issue of
DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE

HOUSE OF FRAUD
By Judson P. Philips

Frantically, she ran out of this house of deception where she and her father had been decoyed, only to find another lawbreaker awaiting her—charming and eager to help her.

THE MISSING EYE
By Christopher B. Booth

Eagerly, they sought for the "Missing Eye" for the solution of the crime, but their failure gave them a startling clew.

A CHASED KISSER
By Roland Krebs

Sheik's amusing folly with this sleeping beauty gave him a lot of unexpected—pain.

Also Features by

J. S. Fletcher
Mel Watt
And Others

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On the Stands Now

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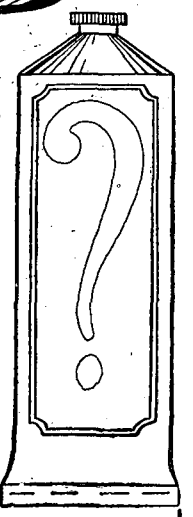
WIN $1000.00 CASH

NAME THIS

This Offer Open to Every Reader of this Announcement



Have you sent a name? If not, do so at once. It makes no difference who you are or where you live we want you to send us a name for this new and unusual shampoo. Whoever sends the most suitable name will win $1000—nothing else to do.

NOTHING TO BUY—NOTHING TO SELL

You can use a coined word or a word made by combining two or more words, such as "Sungleam," "Youthglow," etc., or any other name you think would fit the high quality of this shampoo. Or your name might suggest the handy, new container, our latest sanitary tube from which the Shampoo is simply squeezed out, thus eliminating the waste and trouble caused by the old-fashioned liquid soap in bottles. There is nothing to buy or sell—simply the person sending the most suitable suggestion for a name will receive $1000 cash prize, or if prompt $1100 in all.

ANY NAME MAY WIN

No matter how simple you think your suggestion is you cannot afford to neglect sending it at once. Any name may win.

Win this $1000 cash prize by a few moments' thought. How can you earn this amount of money easier or more quickly? Remember, there is no obligation! The person submitting the winning name will have nothing else to do to win the $1000 and the extra $100, if prompt. In choosing a name bear in mind this shampoo is marvelous for cleansing the hair and scalp. It is designed to bring out the beauty, lustre and natural gloss of the hair. Remember, too, how handy the new sanitary tube is for traveling, no bottle to leak or spill, no cake of soap to lie around and collect germs. The only thing necessary to win is to send the name we choose as the best and most suitable for this shampoo. Only one name will be accepted from each contestant. This unusual offer is only one of a number of offers embraced in our novel distribution plan of ultra toilet goods, whereby those taking part may win any one of twenty-odd prizes, the highest of which is $3500 cash. By participating in our distribution plan the winner of the $1100 cash prize may win an additional $3500, making a total of $4600. Everyone sending a name, regardless of whether it wins or not, will be given the same opportunity to win the $3500 or one of the other cash prizes. Get busy with your suggestion at once—do not delay!

$100 EXTRA FOR PROMPTNESS

To get quick action we are going to pay the winner an extra $100 for promptness or $1100 in all—so send your suggestion AT ONCE!

Contest Rules

This contest is open to everyone except members of this firm, its employees and relatives.

Each contestant may send only one name. Sending two or more names will cause all names submitted by that person to be thrown out.

Contest closes April 30, 1930. Duplicate prizes will be given in case of ties.

To win the promptness prize of $100 extra, the winning name suggested must be mailed within three days after our announcement is read.

PARIS AMERICAN PHARMACAL CO.,
908 McCune Bldg., Des Moines, Iowa.

Enclosed with this coupon on separate sheet is my suggestion for a name.

Date this announcement was read.....

Date my suggestion is mailed.....

Name .....

Address .....

NOTE: Being prompt qualifies you for the extra $100 as outlined in this announcement.

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LOW PAY.. LONG HOURS.. ROUTINE.. NO FUTURE

Always worrying over money. Always skimping and economizing—going without the comforts and luxuries that every man DESERVES for his family and himself.

The Time Clock—a badge of hawk-like supervision and The Rut. A constant reminder that one is "just another name on the pay-roll."

Human cogs in a great machine. No chance to meet people, travel, or have interesting experiences. A long, slow, tiresome road that leads nowhere.

Always wondering what would happen in case of a "lay-off" or loss of job. No chance to express ability—no chance to get ahead. COULD there be a way out?

I Said "Good-bye" to It All After Reading This Amazing Book—Raised My Pay 700%!

Where Shall We Send Your Copy—Free?

WHEN a man who has been struggling along at a low-pay job suddenly steps out and commences to earn real money—$5,000, $7,500, or $10,000 a year—he usually gives his friends quite a shock. It's hard for them to believe he is the same man they used to know—but such things happen much more frequently than most people realize. Not only one, but HUNDREDS have altered the whole course of their lives after reading the amazing book illustrated at the right.

True, it is only a *book*—just seven ounces of paper and printer's ink—but it contains the most vivid and inspiring message that any ambitious man can read. It reveals facts and secrets that will open almost any man's eyes to things he has never even dreamed of!

Remarkable Salary Increases

For example, R. B. Hansen of Akron, Ohio, is just one case. Not long ago he was a foreman in the rubber-curing room of a big factory at a salary of $160 a month. One day this remarkable volume, "The Key to Master Salesmanship," fell into his hands. And from that day on, Mr. Hansen clearly saw the way to say "good-bye" forever to low pay, long hours, and tiresome routine! Today he has reaped the rewards that this little volume placed within his reach. His salary runs well into the 5-figure class—actually exceeding $10,000 a year!

Another man, Wm. Shore of Lake Hughes, California, was a cowboy when he sent for "The Key to Master Salesmanship." Now he is a star salesman making as high as $525 in a single week. L. H. Lundstedt, Chicago, read this free book—and raised himself from a stenographer to the head of a business with 600% increase in earnings. C. V. Champion of Danville, Illinois, raised his salary to over $10,000 a year and became President of his company in the bargain!

A Few Weeks—Then Bigger Pay

There was nothing "different" about any of these men when they started. None of them had any special advantages—although all of them realized that SALESMANSHIP offers bigger rewards than any other profession under the sun. But, like many other men, they subscribed to the foolish belief that successful salesmen are born with some sort of "magic gift." "The Key to Master Salesmanship" showed them that nothing could be farther from the truth! Salesmanship is just like any other profession. It has certain fundamental rules and laws—laws that you can master as easily as you learned the alphabet.

City and traveling sales positions are open in every line all over the country. For years, thousands of leading firms have called on the N. S. T. A. to supply them with salesmen. Employment service is free to both employers and members, and thousands have secured positions this way.

FREE TO EVERY MAN

See for yourself WHY "The Key to Master Salesmanship" has been the deciding factor in the careers of so many men who are now making $10,000 a year. Learn for yourself the REAL TRUTH about the art of selling! You do not risk one penny or incur the slightest obligation. And since it may mean the turning point of your whole career, it certainly is worth your time to fill out and clip the blank below. Send it now!

NATIONAL SALESMEN'S TRAINING ASSOCIATION
Dept. S-322
N. S. T. A. Bldg. Chicago, Ill.

National Salesmen's Training Assn.,
Dept. S-322, N. S. T. A. Bldg.,
Chicago, Ill.

Without cost or obligation, you may send me your free book, "The Key to Master Salesmanship."

Name.....

Address.....

City.....State.....

Age.....Occupation.....

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GOOD READING

BY

CHARLES HOUSTON

"Helen's lips are drifting dust;
Ilion is consumed with rust;
All the galleons of Greece
Drink the ocean's dreamless peace;
Lost was Solomon's purple show
Restless centuries ago;
Stately empires wax and wane—
Babylon, Barbary and Spain;—
Only one thing, undefaced,
Lasts; though all the worlds lie waste
And the heavens are overturned.
Dear, how long ago we learned!"

Through all the shifting scenes of history, from the time when fair Helen and the dream of her sent Grecian armies against Trojan walls to these days when a man and a maid walk arm in arm through the dim twilight of a great industrial city of the West, there remains the Great Common Denominator of young love.

And even as blind Homer sang of the battles on the windy plains, with Helen looking from the battlements, so to-day there are those who are sure of enthralled audiences as they tell of the immortal passion and its effects on the fortunes of men and women.

It is the one subject in the world which is forever young, which time can never stale or custom wither. In this America of the Machine Age, love stories are as eagerly sought as in the romantic era of the Renaissance or the May Days of Merrie England.

From coast to coast to-day men and women are turning to love stories for felicitous escape from the drabness of mass life and are being well rewarded for their endeavors. In the love stories which bear the famous imprint of Chelsea House, one of the largest and best established publishing concerns in the country, there is always that ideal combination of reality and romance which gives luster to any narrative and assures the rapt attention of the reader.

The latest offerings of Chelsea House are outstanding examples of how a good love story should be told. They have life and go, variety and humor, too, and above all, they pluck at the strings of genuine emotion which control the hearts of even the most matter-of-fact among us.

Here are rapid glances at four of the newcomers on this season's Chelsea House list:

THE SPLENDID FOLLY, by Beulah Poynter. Published by Chelsea House, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Price 75 cents.

Would she do it? Would this beautiful, shy, little stenographer take the place of the movie star as a "double" in an act of great daring? That was the question which Dawn McAllister had to answer, and though the thought of it made her tremble from head to foot, her answer was a determined "Yes." For back home was her father suffering from a dreadful illness, in desperate need of the money which Dawn would receive for her daring.

And so she went out to her first great adventure. But it was only the prelude to an almost incredible series of thrilling episodes through which she was to move with head held high. How Dawn found herself, in very earnest, "doubling" for the star, how she fell in love, and how many were the traps laid for her

(Continued on 2nd page following)

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The BEER RUNNERS

By Thomas and Woodward Boyd

A remarkable, human story of a young golf champion who got mixed up with the worst beer-running gangs in Chicago through his love affair with the king beer runner's ward.

In the First December Number of

The POPULAR Magazine

On The News Stands November 7th

"Last night I came home with *great news!*"

"I'D TELEPHONED Nora that I had a surprise for her and she could hardly wait for me to get home. You should have seen her face when I told her the Boss had given me a $25 increase in salary.

"'It's wonderful,' she said, 'just wonderful! Now we can pay some of those bills that have been worrying us and even put a little in the bank each week.

"'Remember the night we saw that coupon and you decided to take up an I. C. S. course? It made a new man of you, Bob, and I knew it wouldn't be long before the firm would notice the difference.

"'We certainly owe a lot to the International Correspondence Schools. You would never have received this increase if you hadn't studied at home and prepared yourself for bigger work.'"

How about you? Are you always going to work for a small salary? Are you going to waste your natural ability all your life? Or are you going to get ahead in a big way?

Don't let another precious hour pass before you find out what the I. C. S. can do for you. It doesn't cost you a penny or obligate you in any way to ask for full particulars, but that one simple little act may be the means of changing your entire life.

Mail Coupon for Free Booklet

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Without cost or obligation, please send me a copy of your booklet, **"Who Wins and Why,"** and full particulars about the course *before* which I have marked X in the list below:

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- ☐ Electric Wiring
- ☐ Electric Lighting
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- ☐ Telegraph Engineer
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- ☐ Mechanical Engineer
- ☐ Mechanical Draftsman
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- ☐ Toolmaker
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GOOD READING—*Continued*

final happiness—these make "The Splendid Folly" a splendid story.

IMPULSIVE YOUTH, by Vivian Grey. Published by Chelsea House, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Price 75 cents.

She was rich. And he was poor. She gave him up because she didn't want to break his mother's heart, the heart of the woman who had saved and scrimped so that he might go to college and get away from the manual labor that seemed destined for him.

It was an impulsive act, the sort of thing she was always doing, for at the start she had acted on impulse when she left her luxurious home to cast in her lot with the humble folk on the other side of the creek. It was impulse that sent her out at midnight to make her own way in the world, alone, with no money in her purse. And when Phil Rhoades found her and would bring her back, she refused, for she was determined that she would not stand in the way of the career of the man she loved.

In a way, it is true that most of us act on impulse at one time or another, trusting somehow to the hidden voices within us that our actions may be for the best. The author of this absorbing story tells what may happen when we make impulse the guide to life. It is a story of youth in the grip of a great love that is here before us, a book that we do not lay aside until the last page is read, and one that we take up again; for it is well worth the rereading.

THE FRONT-PAGE GIRL, by Jack Bechdolt. Published by Chelsea House, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Price 75 cents.

In many respects the city room of a great newspaper is one of the most fascinating places in the world. Particularly is this true if you have never worked in one.

But to Janice O'Dell, fed up with the small-town life of Graniteport and the irascibility of her cranky old guardian, the city room of the New York *Daily Pictorial* seemed like heaven. Then there was a moonlight night and happy-go-lucky Bill Lannigan, who told her some pretty tall stories about the excitements of reporting, and before long Janice found herself in a little apartment in Greenwich Village with Bill's fiancée, hard at work in a novel "school of journalism."

Before she knew it she had plunged headlong into a sea of intrigue. Two romances: a brother long lost and now miraculously reappearing, a front-page story, all in the course of a brief space of time! Enough to make the average newspaper yarn sound like the obituary notices in the Graniteport *Gazette*.

You've seen plays about newspapers and had a hint of what goes on when the presses start to rumble, but it's doubtful if ever before you've read quite such a fascinating newspaper story as "The Front-page Girl."

THE GINGHAM BRIDE, by Beulah Poynter. Published by Chelsea House, 79 Seventh Avenue. New York City. Price 75 cents.

"Locked in each other's arms, black hair mingling with gold, these two children mingled their tears in an outburst of grief for the one they had lost." And then slowly came realization that although they loved, it would be a long time before they could marry. He was nineteen, just starting a college career; she was just a small stray whom a kind woman had taken in. And now that woman had gone, things looked black indeed for poor little Sally.

Then, out of nowhere it seemed, came a ne'er-do-well father who took the girl off into a fantastic world—the world of the troupers. What strange adventures awaited her there! What amazing companions were to be hers! The story of "The Gingham Bride" has tears in it—and laughter—and from start to finish is one that will stir the reader strangely.

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CHELSEA HOUSE

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LOST ANTHILL MINE — Arthur P. Hankins
THE SILENT CRACKSMAN — John Jay Chichester
RESTLESS GUNS — William Colt MacDonald
ANGEL FACE — Vivian Grey
SPRUCE VALLEY — Frank Richardson Pierce
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RIDIN' JIM GORMAN — Joseph Montague
THE GIRL AT THE STAGE DOOR — Beulah Poynter
THUNDER BRAKES — Cherry Wilson
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NICE GIRL — Vivian Grey
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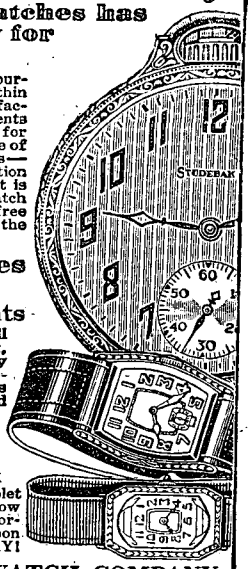

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"Daddy's gone a-hunting"

His desk is clear. His office-door is locked. The evening paper lies heaped beside his chair. The detective story has slipped to the floor beside his bed, two chapters before the end!

The gate of dreams has opened—and another hunter has joined the happy throng.

How quickly and silently they make that journey to dreamland—those smiling men and women, boys and girls, who end their busy day with a soothing Ivory bath!

But once there was a man who took his midnight bath with a cake of *sinker* soap. And all night long in his dreams he dived and dived. At dawn he woke, gasping for breath and weary with the struggle.

Ivory floats!

. . . kind to everything it touches · 99 44/100 % Pure · "It floats"

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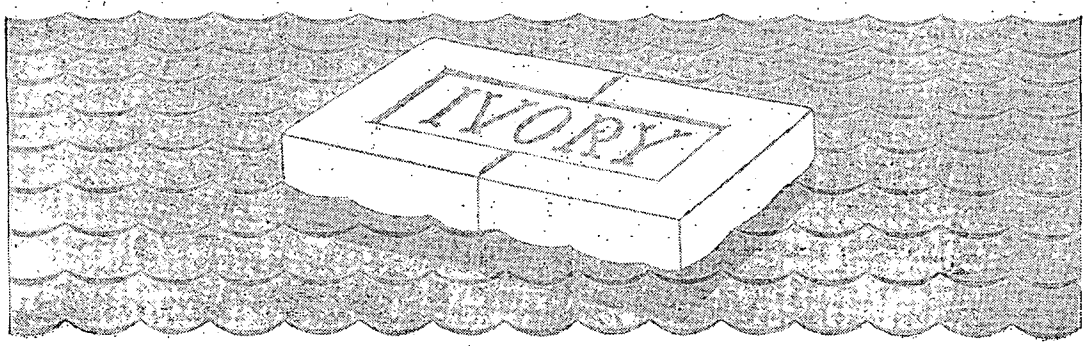

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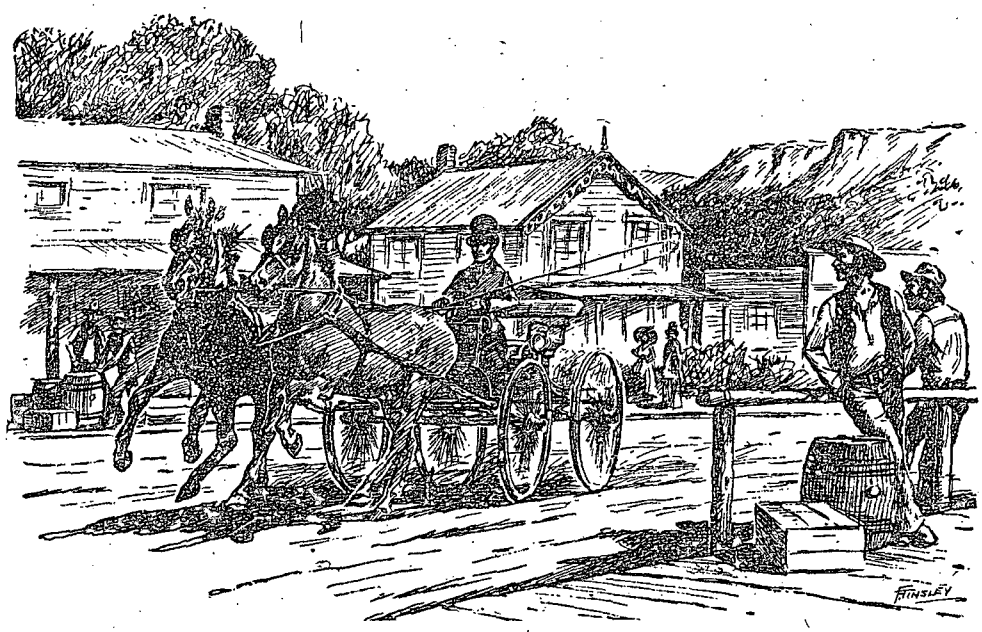

The Duster

By Max Brand

Author of "Geraldi in the Haunted Hills," etc.

CHAPTER I.

ENTER "THE DUSTER."

WHEN I heard that "The Duster" had come out of the mountains, I was working for the Leeman ranch up in the Kerry Hills, and "Bud" Towers was with me eating lunch in the cook house when Old Man Weldy came in and got a hand-out. He told us about The Duster coming out into the open and we all wondered a good deal what mischief he could be up to now. The odd thing was that The Duster wasn't in the saddle; he was driving a buggy with a span! That was what made us all sit up and take notice. We accused Weldy of lying to us, but he swore that he had talked to "Chick" Monroe, and Chick had seen the outfit with his own eyes, and that it was one of the slickest turnouts he ever had seen.

Of course, we wondered what could be eating The Duster to make him take to a buggy. Weldy thought it was just because he'd found it too easy to get out of trouble so long as he had a fast horse between his knees; he said he thought The Duster wanted to liven things up a little and hand a head start to the other fellow. But Towers and I both agreed either that The Duster was finally so broken up with bullets that he couldn't sit a saddle any longer, or else that he had gone crazy, for there were five hundred men in the country who were so anxious to feed him lead that if they couldn't do it one by one, they'd gather in gangs to fix him.

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Finally I said to Weldy: "But it can't be right. I know Chick, and he was sure stringing you."

"Chick was so particular," vowed Weldy, "that he described everything exact, right down to the horses. They're a pair of bays. The off one has three white stockings, and the near one wears a white star, and has one white stocking, and an old OH brand on her shoulder."

That got me onto my feet: "That's Dolly!" said I.

"Who is Dolly?" asked Towers.

"The best cutting mare that ever stepped," I told him, and what I said was true. "That's what became of her, is it? If The Duster has her, he's going to give her up!"

"Are you going to take her away from The Duster?" they asked me, grinning at one another.

But I left them without finishing my second cup of coffee, and rode straight into the ranch house, where I saw Leeman, and told him where I was going and why. Leeman was as tough an old codger as you ever saw, but I must say he was white to me. He pointed out that I had been with him only a year, but that he'd made a foreman of me and would put me on ahead fast.

"Besides," said he, "a man of your age oughta be ashamed of carrying on with gunmen and worthless crooks like The Duster, no matter whether he's got a hoss of yours or not."

"Leeman," said I, "that mare comes when I call her, lies down and stands up, can turn on a dime, and dodge a bullet; she can——"

"Talk French?" says Leeman. "Go on and get out of here, if that's the way you feel about her, and when you get tired chasing that white streak across the hills, you come right on back here and I'll boost you ten."

I thanked him mighty sincere. Coming on the way I was, nigher to fifty than to a good time, it was pretty important to get well placed, and it isn't every boss that boosts you ten whole dollars a month. It isn't every boss that boosts you at all, but mostly they pile on more work, and give you all your raise in the title, as if that word 'Foreman' could be turned into bread and meat, whisky and bullets.

I had a good tough roan gelding, a wild-caught mustang with the heart of a rattlesnake and the strength of blasting powder. That brute jolted and jarred and hammered me all the way down from the Kerry Hills until I got to Christmas, but he made good time, though I was watching the scenery through a haze most of the time and finally reached the town clean punch-drunk.

I had figured that The Duster would take in Christmas when he left the mountains, the main reason being that he had spread himself like hot butter over most of the rest of the landscape around our neck of the woods, but he never had called on Christmas. That was a fine town, too, and the sort of a place that would be sure to make the mouth of The Duster water. I mean, it had a good bank, with a safe that wasn't too new; and it had a couple of pawnshops that dazzled you going by, they were so loaded up in the windows with stick pins, and such, that unlucky punchers had had to leave behind them. It had a lot of other opportunities, like the till of the Mason & Baxter store. Or if everything else failed, The Duster would be able to pick up a pretty rich poker game at the hotel. For there still were some people who would play with The Duster; professionals, all of them, who did it partly to learn, and partly from pride that kept them from refusing.

I had figured, on account of all these things, that The Duster would be coming over Christmas way; and maybe the reason he was driving a span instead of riding was that he wanted

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more than saddlebags for carrying away the loot!

The first thing I did was to walk into Dick Kenyon's saloon to gather the news. Dick was sure glad to see me. We had done the Klondike together years back, so you can imagine how it was when two old sour doughs like us got together. He set up a drink and called to his youngest boy to go out and take the horse to the barn.

"You better gather that pony up in a mosquito net before you take him anywhere," said I, "or he'll sure bite you!"

"Aw, that's all right," said the boy, as fresh as paint, "I don't think that he'll like the taste."

He went out and started wrangling the pony, while I talked to his dad. Dick had a lot to tell me about his family and old friends, but finally he got down to what I wanted to know—The Duster.

He told me it was an actual fact. The Duster had been seen by a dozen people at different places, apparently drifting in the general direction of Christmas, or thereabouts. He had a grand turnout, with big rubber tires on the wheels, and rubber-mounted harness set off with silver points, and a slick span of horses.

"That's just it," said I. "He's gotta pull that buggy with one horse, after I get through with him?"

"Are you going to tackle The Duster?" asked Dick, laughing a little.

"I am," says I, and walked out of the saloon, pretty hot because he wouldn't believe me. But I could believe myself.

I don't think it was all on account of Dolly, though she was the most quick and honest-minded horse that I ever saw; but just on general principles, I was getting too old to put up with robberies. I was getting nervous and mean, I suppose. And I had told two people what I intended to do so that I couldn't turn around and go back in my tracks.

On the other hand, I certainly expected a little more time than I had before running into him.

I had just met "Pudge" Larkin, who owned the bank, or a large part of it, and was president as well. Pudge was the man who gave the place the name of Christmas before ever there was a town in the valley. It was so green to his eye when he came through from a desert freighting trip that he gave it that name of Christmas which had stuck to it to this day. Pudge seemed pretty glad to see me; we had done some freighting together before he got rich. And just as I left him, a man came scooting up and says to Pudge: "The Duster is here!"

"The dickens he is! Not in broad daylight! He wouldn't dare!" says Pudge.

"I seen him with my own eyes," says the other fellow, "and I wouldn't believe it, otherwise but that I'd seen him. He'll come around this corner inside of half a minute."

That was exactly what he did.

Pudge Larkin asked me to go with him to the bank and help him stand guard; he said his Sunday watchman wasn't worth a whoop. But I stayed where I was and watched Pudge run off up the street, at last, reeling a little from side to side, he'd grown so fat.

My mind was as fixed as fate to step out and stop The Duster when he came along in the buggy, and claim my stolen horse from him, and if you think that's pretty desperate, you have to remember that life hadn't been so sweet to me that I hated to give up the taste of the last part of it!

The rumor had flown ahead of The Duster far enough to bring people to windows and doors with a rush, you could hear screens jingling and slamming all around, but I noticed that there were mighty few men lingering

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around along the walks. You couldn't tell what The Duster would do, as a matter of fact. He might even drive down that street and shoot some one in cold blood. He had the nerve for it and self-confidence, and after having been tried and acquitted five times for robbery and murder, it would have been a wonder if he had not believed in himself.

Where I was standing, I had a good slant up to the corner of the street and across through some vacant lots to the other side of the valley, where the cattle were grazing—all big red Durhams, so fat that they fair shone, even at that distance.

And now around the corner, and across my view of the other hillside, as you might say, came The Duster.

But when I saw him, no matter how I had heard him described in his new outfit, I couldn't believe my eyes.

There was the span of bays to begin with, and the near horse was my own good mare, Dolly, just as I had suspected. However, I didn't step out and stop The Duster. I simply couldn't. My head was too full of what I was seeing.

In the first place, you would have to get into your mind the picture that we usually saw when The Duster went by—that is to say, a handsome young buck togged out in enough color to paint a rainbow clean across the sky, with pearl-handled revolvers showing in the saddle holsters, and a lot of silver and gold work on the saddle and the bridle. His horse was always shod with fire, as you might say, and went on its hind legs by preference; but now all that was changed.

The bays trotted along like Sunday school, so smooth and quiet; and there was a fine rubber-tired rig behind them, bright as water in its new paint; and in the seat there was The Duster all togged up in black clothes, with a white cloth twisted around his neck, so that he looked like a picture of 1840, sort of. And he had yellow chamois gloves on his hands, even on his gun hand! Though I could notice even in a passing glance, that the leather of those gloves was hardly thicker than a weevil's skin.

This sight of The Duster fair staggered me, but that was nothing compared to what I felt when he raised a hand to me and nodded and said: "Good morning, Mr. Wye."

Which was the first time in fifteen years that I had been called anything but "Baldy."

CHAPTER II.

THE MINISTER SPEAKS.

THAT Sunday morning, the town of Christmas had nothing to do except to plait new horsehair bridles, or scrape the sweat-salt off of saddles, or think up new lies for old neighbors, and a few of them went to church. So the town of Christmas, being at leisure, was able to follow The Duster, partly with its eyes and partly by report, and to trace him straight up to the one church in the town. There wasn't much need for that church on Sundays, as a matter of fact, because hardly anybody went there. But it was very handy to have a preacher around for weddings and christenings and burials. Besides, the Reverend Kenneth Lamont could make speeches for any old occasion, from a housewarming to the Fourth of July. All he needed was a warning the night before, so that he could pick out a couple of good texts, and then he would sail in and make you the finest sort of a speech just offhand. Words flowed out of that preacher as easy as beer out of a beer keg once the bung is knocked out of it. Besides that, he had a good little herd of cattle worked up, and almost any day you could see one of his tow-headed kids riding barebacked and barelegged through the town. Their father was pretty hard boiled, and his kids used to

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lick everything on two legs that walked the streets of Christmas.

That will give you an idea of the sort of a church that the Reverend Kenneth Lamont ran. It stood on the top of a bald little hill at the east end of the town, and it was a scalped-looking shack itself. It had been built by free labor out of free lumber, and it looked the part. There were about a hundred knots as big as your fist that had been knocked in by the kids or by time and weathering, and every one of those holes looked right through the thin sides of that house; and when you went inside, which I never had done before that day, you could see the sunlight blinking on both hands.

There were a lot of other people in Christmas who made their first trip to the church that morning along with me, and the reason was that The Duster had gone up there to the top of the hill, and hitched his span in the horse shed near the church.

It was just before the service time, and the minister was inside, whanging and banging away at the bell. That hill was so high above the rest of the town that when the bell rang, according to how the wind was, sometimes it sounded like a mighty fire alarm, and sometimes it was like the honking of a great flock of geese far up in the sky.

When Reverend Kenneth Lamont came out of the church, he saw there was a man hanging around the little graveyard which stood on the south face of the hill, so it could get all the sun. The rain came smashing and crashing there in the winter, and washed out gullies between the headstones, and undermined some of the stones themselves. Nothing seemed to grow easy and natural in that yard except thistles and cactus, but they did pretty well, and you could always be sure of stepping on some sort of a sticker the minute that you stepped inside the wall of that consecrated ground.

The preacher, when he saw the stranger, went up and hailed him.

"Are you lookin' for a friend?" says he.

"Yes," says the stranger, "I'm looking out a place for him."

"There's a good south corner down there, where grass would grow, in a decent summer," said the minister, "and I could maybe fix it for you at a cut rate."

"Business been sort of dull?" says the other.

The minister, when he heard this, stepped around the corner of the stranger and looked him in the face.

"The Duster!" says he.

"The same," says The Duster. "How do you do, Mr. Lamont?"

"Poor," says the minister. "I'm doing sort of poorly, because the time has come when nobody much comes to the church except the yeggs and gamblers and confidence men and bank robbers, and such."

"Well, that ought to make excitement," said The Duster. "They ought to bring a few reporters up here, besides. But speaking about that corner lot, I'd like to see it."

Lamont took him down, and they looked at the lot. The shadow of the south wall kept it from a good deal of the sun, so that, as the minister said, some grass could grow here and keep green most of the year round.

That seemed to look good to The Duster, though he pointed out that the view was none too good.

Says the minister: "The man that lives there will either be lookin' straight down or straight up, and he won't care about the side views all around."

The Duster admitted that this was right.

Then he said that he would buy the plot right off, and asked for a price.

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"Who is it for?" says the minister, "or have you just made a reservation like a good business man and expect to fill it later?"

"He's already dead," said The Duster.

"And he wanted to lie here?"

"I wouldn't say that. But I figured that this would be a cheap place to put him away."

"My prices," said Lamont, "depend on the customer. There's the stone of Mrs. Greenway that died last month. She got that spot for nothing at all! And there's Tom Loftus' place over yonder. Well, Tom had to pay seventy-five dollars for a place to lie down and rest."

"It's too much," says The Duster.

"I'll make it seventy flat to you, my friend," said the minister, "if it's the right sort of a man that you want to bring in here."

The Duster laughed a little.

"I'll answer for him," he explained, "that he's been all his life one of the best pals and the straightest shooter that I ever saw."

"In that case, we'll be glad to have him. What's his name?"

"Hector Manness," says The Duster.

"Hey!" says the minister. "Manness?"

"Yes."

"The worst scoundrel in seven States!" yelled Lamont. "And a traitor to his friends! How can you call him a straight shooter?"

"Would you like to have taken a chance in front of his gun?" says The Duster.

"That has nothing to do with the case."

"What difference does it make, though? I'm willing to buy the ground for Hec to sleep in. That ought to end your trouble."

"Did you ever go to a hotel where the rooms were full?" said the minister. "And were you ever refused while the clerk was still handing out rooms to others?"

"Yes, I've had that happen to me."

"What did you do then?"

"Well, to make a long story short, I slept in that hotel, all right."

"And so you'll have your friend sleep in this graveyard where he isn't wanted?"

"I don't threaten," said The Duster, which was true.

"Don't you? You don't waste time in talk. You just act, I suppose?"

"You're peevish, to-day," says The Duster. "And you won't listen to reason."

"When I hear it, I will," says the minister. "Is it reason to ask the widows and children and all the mourners of dead men to take in a murderer to sleep among them and be buried by the same hands and voice?"

"The wolf ate chalk," says The Duster, "to change his voice."

"I don't foller that."

"You will, later on. In the meantime, I have reasons for wanting to bury him here that you would never guess."

"Perhaps I wouldn't. But in the meantime, I don't want to guess. I want to simply tell you the facts about where you stand."

"You're hard," said The Duster.

"But truthful. For eight years I've heard a great deal about The Duster and his works. I saw you for the first time five years ago on the Ohio Eastern, when you held it up."

"I was acquitted of that, however."

"I didn't acquit you," says the minister. "And if I had had my way, I would have seen you strung up to the highest cottonwood tree around the town."

"You're talking about me, and I'm talking about my partner."

"The money to buy the ground would be tainted."

"This is the price of his horse, that

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I'm offering to you. He owned his horse."

"I suppose he may have. It isn't merely a matter of tainted money, though; it has to do with a corrupt soul asking to come and lie among Christians!"

"Heaven forgive you!" says The Duster. "I've had my life saved by poor Hector Manness."

"Are you sure that he was a good man?"

"He was. He never would cheat you at cards out of more than fifty dollars at a time. That was how poor a business man he was, my friend."

"You can say what you want," replied the minister. "But if he had been the hardest-headed business man in the world, he could not be buried here under any circumstances."

"You hit me pretty hard," says The Duster. "I'm begging you to let me bury my poor dead friend in your churchyard."

"I hear you beg, and I laugh," says the minister. "I keep that yard for the honest men and women of this town, and they're not to blush when they see the name of Manness on a headstone!"

As he said this, he turned on his heel and walked off to the church door.

CHAPTER III.

THE LAST WORD.

YOU may gather by this that Lamont was a stern man—and that he was! He came from a hard-headed, hard-handed Highland clan and he knew his own way no matter where he was.

But by this time the congregation was gathering, and it was the biggest that the Presbyterian church on the hill ever had known, including any Christmas or wedding. The whole town was up there. You could even see the little boys trudging along. They had washed their faces as far back as the cheek bones and some of them looked like faces peeking through a hole, but they were all eager to get into that church. Not that they cared a rap about the church or the minister—as a minister—but because they wanted to see the great Duster.

He was a sight to see, all right, as he sat in the back of the church. He looked a little colder and calmer than ever and the minister was in a terrible heat, so that it made you hot to even look at him. Before the crowd came, The Duster had walked up to him and said: "Let's cut this all short, Lamont. I've got to bury the ashes of my friend in that yard, because he begged me to do it when he died."

"I knew Hector Manness for forty year, man and child," said Lamont. "I never knew him to think a good thought or do a good deed, and the request he made of you was no better than the rest of his ways."

You see, Lamont felt that that church and churchyard were the antechamber of Heaven itself, which he had to keep clean. He swept the church himself, and washed the windows. He weeded the churchyard, fought the cactus off the graves, and carried on the whole battle by himself, but this was not the sort of a life to make him charitable to professional gamblers, gunmen, man-killers, liars, and sneak-thieves. All Christmas knew how Lamont had spotted Dick Kirby in the church, dead drunk, and thrown him out through the front door. I suppose he wanted to do the same thing with The Duster, but even Lamont was not quite man enough to tackle such a job as that.

When he had made this retort to The Duster, the latter said to him: "Look here, man. You live on short rations. You have a lot of children. How far would five hundred dollars go with you?"

"So far," said the minister, "that it

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would take me and all my family nearly to the gates of perdition!"

You see how quickly he had taken up the challenge of a bribe, so that there was no chance for The Duster to carry on with his argument and his persuasion.

Matters had gone along like this, when the crowd began to arrive and to drift in, eager to see The Duster. And they saw him plainly enough. He had a seat right in the rear corner of the church—I suppose because he wanted his back guarded—and while he was there, every one could turn around and take a look at him, sooner or later. The little children whirled right around in their places and gaped and rolled their eyes, in spite of the way their mothers poked at them, but the mothers were there for the same reason, and got in their own curious glances from time to time. The men would not be undignified, but they would cough behind their hands and, pretending to turn to speak to a friend, they would get a whack at The Duster in the midst of it all, and note down the looks of the man who had killed "Tex" Wycombe, and Harry Bister, and Lew Morris, and Charlie Young, and run Dick Packard right off the face of the earth. I mean, Packard ran to Mexico and never came back.

We all knew that The Duster had done a good many more things than these, but no one knew the whole list of the men he had dropped, or nicked, or laid away for repairs of some sort. We were only sure that he had met these famous gunmen and beaten them all, and I suppose there was not a boy in that church—or hardly a man—who would not rather have had the long and terrible record of The Duster than to be the President of the United States.

And so would I!

There was nothing extraordinary about The Duster. He was average size, maybe twenty-five or twenty-seven years old, good looking in an indistinguishable sort of way, and rather with the look of a dude about him, especially in these dark, fine clothes that he had on. He had one thing to set him off and that was the strong blue of his eyes, which you would see once and never forget again, so long as you lived.

The girls were the ones most apt to notice The Duster, even though he was so quiet. But back there by the wall he sat looking straight before him or, if an eye crossed his, he was apt to meet it with a faint sort of pathetic smile.

I watched him, I think, a little more carefully than any of the others did, and I was sure that he was working his wits all the time, because it seemed to me that there was just a shade of mist over his eyes, such as thought will put there with the best of men.

I watched him carefully, because I had made up my mind. Having announced my intention a long time before of reclaiming my horse from the gunman, I intended to challenge his right to it immediately after church.

In other words, I had maybe an hour of life left to me. And there's nothing like that feeling of the last hour to sharpen your eyes!

This affair of mine had me so excited that I don't remember the ceremony very well, except that there was some praying out loud, and some organ music and singing, particular of a pretty sandy-haired girl with a pair of soft-gray eyes, like bits of blue-gray flannel. She was so sweet and innocent and young that you could look slam at her, exactly as though she were a child, and she would look back at you and give you a bit of a smile in the middle of her singing.

I hooked an elbow into the ribs of the man next to me and he said that was Marguerite Lamont, the daughter of the minister. She was about all the

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music in that church, and she was enough to be a credit to a good deal larger place than Christmas.

Then along came the sermon, and the minister rolled his eyes a couple of times, got redder and hotter, until it looked as though he had just dipped his face in a basin of water, and then he began, in a voice that you could hear through the trembling walls of that shack clear down to the grocery store.

Gosh, what a gasp of whispering went through that church when Lamont finished bellowing of his text! He gripped the edges of his little pine reading stand and glared over the rim of his big Bible straight down at The Duster; and everybody had to turn around and stare, so that it made me think of a funnel of curiosity, and hatred, and fury, all poured down into the face of The Duster.

But he merely met all those eyes with his faint smile, as though he was troubled by some sort of inside sorrow. His black coat made his face seem pale; he sat up stiff and straight; and I never saw a human more perfectly controlled.

He needed more and more of that same control, however, for now the minister was fairly started, and all he did was to make hay out of The Duster. Then he burned the hay! There ought to have been nothing but cinders and a whiff of ash left of the great Duster, I can tell you. For Lamont began at the beginning, drawing a mighty clear picture of the poor and honest workers, piling and putting away a few savings, for the sake of their children rather than for themselves, and then he drew a still more vivid picture of the sneaking robber who entered the bank where those savings were kept, and took them away, so that all the honesty of the victims and all their labor went for nothing. They were cast away—they were withered!

And how Lamont turned in and withered the robber for that!

It was as good a sermon as I ever heard preached. The best thing about it was that it was turned off improvised, like that; and we all could see the point of it, sitting back there in the shadow of the corner, looking pale and serious.

I think that some of the people half expected that The Duster would pull guns and start blowing daylight into all of us, but I knew him better than that. But as I watched him and thought about him, I couldn't help wondering how it was that a single man should be able to inspire so much fear in a whole crowd. If he had pulled out a gun, I'll wager that the entire crowd would have started running like sheep.

One frightened mother, as the sermon went along, actually got up and herded her three children out of the church, before the lightning should strike.

But The Duster made no move and gave no sign of trouble coming, and presently the sermon ended.

At the last words of it, The Duster stood up in his place, and the whole of that packed-in congregation shrank a bit away from him. I know, because I did part of the shrinking, though I was a good distance away.

But all The Duster did was to say in the most quiet voice in the world:

"Do you know me well enough to talk about me as fully as this?"

"I know you," said Lamont, always ready to fight, "I know you as well as I know smoke and fire."

"Do you so much as know my name?" says The Duster.

Very neat and pointed, that was. No, the minister did not know the name, and neither did I.

Says The Duster: "I am John Penny Thurlow."

After he said that, he turned and walked out of the church.

I can't tell why this made such a

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great impression upon all of us. Perhaps it was because Lamont himself couldn't fish out some last stinging remark with which to chuck The Duster out of his church.

The crook walked off with the honors of the day, it seemed. Not that having two names made him two men, but that his final retort seemed to parry everything that the minister had said. There was a certain amount of dignity about it, too. Because every soul there realized by something in the voice and the manner of The Duster that this name he gave to them was the truth!

It fairly choked Lamont.

I thought that the man would die as he hung onto the sides of his reading stand and glowered down at his congregation, and at the door out of which The Duster had just stepped.

I didn't wait for Lamont to catch his breath, but I went out to see The Duster face to face and get back my Dolly-mare, or die trying. Besides, though I was a slower man than The Duster and he was bound to sink a bullet into me first, one shot doesn't always kill. And certainly before he fired twice I would have lead in him.

CHAPTER IV.

TO HAVE A GOOD NAME.

THAT was the way I felt when I went up to The Duster in the shed outside the church. He had on his thin chamois gloves again, and he was untying the lead ropes of the span. Mighty neat and fast and slick they looked; and the buggy, since he had given it a wipe, looked as if it were made of glass. That was the way with The Duster; whatever he did was done better than other men could do it, and whatever he had seemed better than all other men's possessions. Those lead ropes, for instance, were good smooth cotton rope, and the top of the neck stall was flattened out, so that there would be no harm done if a horse began to back and plunge while tied. I never had seen an arrangement like that before, and it made me feel pretty inferior to The Duster, to begin with.

When he saw me sauntering up, he gave me a salute and a smile; then he came back and shook hands with me, while he gathered the reins and made ready to step into the buggy.

It was "Mr. Wye" again, as he spoke.

"You must've pretty nigh forgot me, Duster," I told him. "Why the Mister?"

"Because I'm tired of nicknames—like my own," said he.

He waited, holding the reins, and looking me in the eye. The glance of some men weighs you down like lead. The Duster was one such.

"Well," said I, "I've got some bad news for you. That near mare you're driving belongs to me."

The Duster glanced at Dolly and then back at me.

"Well," said he, "I'm sorry to hear that, but I won't ask for much proof."

I was surprised to hear him say that, and I was terribly happy, too. I went a bit closer and spoke her name. The way she jumped and turned would have done you good to see.

Of course, she knew me, and she showed it so well that nobody could have doubted.

"I paid four hundred dollars for that mare," said The Duster, biting his lip a little.

I watched him like a hawk, of course. It was true that he seemed on his good behavior, but I wouldn't go by the appearances alone. Every second, I was expecting that hand of his to move like the flick of a snapper on a whip. But it did not move. He was as calm and as slow as could be; but when he named what the mare had cost I knew he was telling me the truth.

"The fellow who sold that mare to

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you was a fool, then," said I. "Because she's worth a cold thousand of any man's money, and if you don't believe me, ask any of them that have seen her cutting."

"She's a cutting horse, all right," said The Duster. "I've had a saddle on her, and she nearly twisted herself out from under me the first morning. This mare belongs to you, you say?"

"Have you got a regular bill of sale for her, and all that?"

He shook his head.

"The fellow was a thief," said he, "but usually he works the northern range and sells on the south, so that it's pretty safe to buy from him. However—you shall have your Dolly back again, Baldy."

I was glad to hear the nickname from him, but still I was a good deal upset. Men don't give up horses like Dólly without a twinge.

"Come home with me, Baldy," said The Duster, "and then I'll give you the mare."

"That depends on where home is," I told him frankly.

For I was still expecting some trick from him.

"I've got a shack on the edge of town," he said.

It ended with me getting into the rig with him and driving off through the crowd of people who still were streaming out of the church. Just as the team was breaking into a trot, The Duster pulled them up again. He had stopped beside Marguerite Lamont, and as she turned her gentle, frightened face toward him, he lifted his hat to her, gravely and with dignity.

"Your father seems pretty badly upset about me," said he. "Do you think he'd let me come to see him at his house?"

She had to wait a minute to draw breath.

Then: "Of course he would want to see you, Mr. Thurlow," she said.

"Thanks. I won't fail to come around."

He put on his hat again, and the weight of his glance still was lingering on her face; so, with a little smile, he started the team on once more.

There couldn't have been a more proper way for him to act; but all the while I was worried a lot, I didn't know why. I had the feeling that there was something back in the mind of the gunman, and I hoped that nothing would drop on me—nor on young Marguerite Lamont.

The place that he had was out on the edge of the town, looking down into the valley, and across toward the hills beyond. It didn't amount to much. All the house there was huddled under the arms of a great big oak tree; there was a little barn—a shed, rather—behind the house, along with a couple of acres of corral and pasture surrounded by ragged fencing. The Ridley family had grown up here, and that family could have wrecked a jail as they grew. They would have broken iron, and they frayed the little house, all right. The windmill looked as though it was going to fall down, and the fences had rickets, and the barn stood there with a broken back.

Dell, it was a ramshackle place, but it was usable, though I wondered why The Duster wanted a place where his hundred enemies could all come out there and find shelter among the trees while they stalked him. However, the trees were the best part of it, in a way. They gave you good shade, and still it was easy to look through openings in them and see the valley on the other side. Farther off, under the same kind of trees, the cattle gathered thick in the heat of the day, flinging their tails and heads all the while to keep the flies off. Everything had a good, lazy, comfortable look, and for my part, I don't like a dressed-up house and garden. I like clothes you can sit on the ground

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with, if you want; and all I ask is chairs that don't creak, and that don't bust when you tilt them back.

I looked over the shack and the grounds a little with The Duster, because he asked me to go around with him. I told him that it looked pretty all right to me, but not the sort of a place that I would expect him to pick out.

"Why not?" says he.

"Because you've got enough money to swell around, if you want to."

Nobody ever could be as frank as The Duster, when he wanted to. He felt frank to-day, and he added: "I couldn't enjoy swelling around in front of a whole town. Everybody that saw me go by would wonder where I stole the money for my horse, or my diamond pin. But you like the place well enough for yourself?"

"Yes, it looks right to me."

"Then I'll tell you what you do. You go and drive down to your hotel, pick up your stuff there, and come back here."

I shook my head.

"I can't do it," said I.

"You've got to," said The Duster.

"I came here to get this mare. I've got her, and now I'm going back to my own part of the range."

"I thought you knew the whole range?" said he.

"I've rode a part of it," I said. "But I need to get back on the job. I'm not a rich man like you, Duster."

"You're staying here," said The Duster. "Listen to me: I've argued with another man already, to-day, and I'm not going to start arguing again with you. I'll pay you anything you want. You name the price."

"What sort of a job? What doing?"

"Just staying here with me."

"Nothing to do?"

"You can cook, can't you? And you can handle the pair of horses that I'll have?"

"I can do those things. You can guess the kind of cooking that I do."

"I can eat raw; so you're cooking won't bother me. You'll stay?"

"I don't understand this," I came out at him frankly. "We've never known each other well; we've never been friends; and, besides, it's not likely that you'd enjoy my lingo for very long. I don't follow your drift, Duster."

"It may be that you'll sometimes see strangers loafing around among these trees with guns in their hands. You'd be a scarecrow to keep off birds of that kind," said he. "But most of all, I want you here to give me a good name."

"A what?"

"People know that you're honest, Baldy. No matter who you're with, the people know that you're honest, and it will do me a lot of good to have you along. I'll pay you ten dollars a day."

Big pay any time on the range; but in those days, it was like rolling in gold. I stared at him until my eyes swelled, but he meant what he said.

This made me scratch my head. No matter what sort of a fellow The Duster was, or how mysterious, ten dollars was ten dollars. However, I finally said: "This sounds very well. It's a comfortable sort of a thing to hear that you want me because I'm honest. But I can tell you this: I won't take this job unless I know why you're in Christmas."

"What difference does that make?"

"Maybe none at all. But I'm curious."

"You ask a good deal," said The Duster. "You'd better take your mare and go."

He turned on his heel and walked into the house, and I can tell you that this was a good deal of a chill to me. However, I did what he said, but just as I got the harness off of Dolly, he called to me, and I saw him leaning

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in the door of the house with one foot crossed over the other.

"Come here, Baldy," said he.

I went up to him and saw he was as grave as ever, although there was a hint of a smile in his eyes.

"You insist on knowing my private business?"

"Yes, if I take the job."

"Well, then, I'll tell you why I'm in Christmas. Go get your things. I'll tell you this evening, because I couldn't put that story into less than an hour's talk."

CHAPTER V.

DUST AND ASHES.

IT would take too long to put that story into his own words, the way he told it to me that evening. We sat around in the open under the trees, after finishing supper, and my new boss told me a lot of things about Hector Manness, first of all—about the character of Manness, I mean.

I had seen that fellow myself and always wrote him down a hound and a skunk, with just the courage of a rat, that will fight in a corner and poison you when it bites. Manness always would rather run than fight, though they say that before the end of him, he had finished off eleven men. But this was not credited by The Duster, who swore that most lists of a killer's victims were fattened up a good deal, and that Manness had counted for five men, and not a soul more.

Five was enough, however, for a ratty cur like Manness!

But it seemed that Manness was something more than a cur, too. That is to say, The Duster swore by him as the best of friends. They had done a hundred jobs together. They had cracked safes, ridden the road, played crooked cards, and in all the things they had tried in partnership, Manness never had failed to be perfectly square.

His crookedness with every one else may have pleased The Duster all the more. At any rate, he stuck by Manness, and Manness stuck by him, so that they were often together when they had big deals on.

The end of this partnership came about three months before this time. I'll sketch in what had happened just before. They had framed a good job against an Idaho bank, and it would have worked perfectly if their inside man had not wanted a bigger split. They wouldn't give it, and so he told his employers and the two of them stepped straight into a trap.

They got out, however. They did some shooting to clear their way outside, where they snatched a pair of horses and rode into the hills.

They were followed, of course, but they were making pretty good time when a bullet from the rear struck the horse of The Duster. Not a fatal wound, but the loss of blood was taking the sap out of it fast.

When this happened, Manness pulled up and helped fight off the first part of the posse; then in the dark they gave the whole gang the slip, and going to a ranch, they "borrowed" a pair of fresh horses. They were followed again the next day, and that day a long range rifle shot struck Manness.

Even then he played the man and said nothing about his wound until they were safely away from the pursuers. Then he was too far gone to be saved. The Duster did what he could, but the life of Manness dwindled and flickered like candle flame in a breeze, and he knew that his partner was close to the end.

"You know, this fellow was a skinny little runt," said The Duster. "He looked dried out, no juice left, nothing but fur and meanness, like a lynx. When he knew that he was going to die, he took a stiff shot of whisky, lighted a cigarette, and simply waited for the finish.

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"I thought that he was thinking over something to say, but he wasn't. He was simply lying there looking death in the face, and trying to scare it away, you might suppose.

"I sat down beside him.

"'Is there anything you want?' I asked him.

"'A grave,' said he.

"I thought he was joking, naturally.

"'You'll have a grave fast enough,' I told him.

"'I mean a real grave in a graveyard,' says he.

"'Old son,' said I, 'we're a hundred miles from that sort of a thing.'

"'Christmas,' says Manness, 'is where I'd like to sleep the rest of my life. Life?'

"He put in that last word with a little chuckle. I never thought that he believed in anything, but I was wrong. He believed in life after death. And gradually I got out of him that all his latter days he had always hoped that his burial ground would be the churchyard in Christmas.

"When I learned that, I told him that I'd see that his ashes, anyway, were buried in Christmas. He laughed in my face, though it nearly snuffed him out to laugh like that.

"'That minister, Lamont, knows all about me,' said he, 'and he'll never let me be buried there.'

"'He'll never have to know that it's you,' said I.

"There poor Manness grew quite peevish.

"'What good would it do me to lie there and have nobody know that I was around? I want to have the smart fellows inside the law come along and say: "There's Manness, the robber. His grave looks as happy as the next one!"'

"I could understand what he meant, though it seemed a funny way of looking at the matter.

"'If that's what you want, I'll give you my word of honor to put you in Christmas graveyard,' says I.

"'You can't,' he answered. 'You don't know Lamont.'

"'He can be scared,' said I.

"'Not by a herd of buffalo!' said he.

"'He can be flattered.'

"'I've never seen anybody succeed.'

"'He can be bought, then!'

"'Not even if you could promise him the gift of life.'

"'I don't believe he's half as hard as you make out,'" I told Manness, but he swore that the minister was like a fellow in armor.

"Well, Baldy, to make a short story out of it, the death pain began to hit Manness, and I held onto him while he struggled and shouted, because his nerve gave way a good deal toward the end. His mind went bad, too, and he told me that he was certainly going to wind up in fire unless I could promise him that he would sleep in Christmas graveyard.

"What could I do?

"I simply told him that I would certainly bury him in the Christmas graveyard and put up a monument over the spot where his ashes were planted.

"Now, the minute that I said that, Manness seemed to stop feeling the pain. He lay looking up at the sky like a child listening for a voice, and smiling. He kept hold of one of my hands and a couple of times he said: 'My boots are off, Duster!'

"You see, he had a horror of dying with them on, the way that most of the gunmen go. It was the prayer of poor old Manness, I think you might say. 'My boots are off!'—like that—sort of laughing in the depths of his throat.

"Then, just before he died, Baldy, he said something to me——"

As he got this far in the story, The Duster slowed up and looked me bang in the face.

"You're an honest man, Baldy," he

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said, "and so I can tell you this. Just before the end, Manness gave my hand an extra hard squeeze. I saw that his lips were stirring a bit, and when I leaned over him close I heard him say: 'God bless you, Duster! You make me sure of Heaven.' That same instant he died, smiling and happy, if ever I saw happiness."

Here The Duster stopped again and began to walk up and down as though the memory of that death scene stirred him up a good deal. But still I couldn't be at all sure, for he was able to play any part he chose just like an actor of a stage, except that The Duster never had to rehearse.

So I watched him carefully, to see if he would flick an eye in my direction, at any time, to discover how his play was affecting me. Yet I wasn't able to detect any flaw in the naturalness of that acting.

Presently The Duster stopped his pacing and said to me: "I've told you the story of how Manness died, and how I came to promise him a place in the Christmas churchyard."

"Why should he pick out that place?" I asked.

"Because it looks down over the river, I suppose," said The Duster.

I could see something in that, because down at the bottom of the hill the yard looked onto the run of Christmas River, morning and evening and night. If you looked at it long enough it seemed to be moving with every image that fell into it. The hills, the cattle, the trees, the blue head of the sky, the little white puffs of clouds curling at the edges like smoke. Until pretty soon you felt that you were in movement with the stream, and that it was carrying you along under new skies, and all that sort of thing, but keeping you and the hills and the trees and the rest of Christmas all together. I saw that picture, and suddenly I knew that it must have run into the mind of poor dead Hector Manness, so that really he felt in his heart that no matter what his life had been, in his death he could find the gate to Heaven if he were put into the graveyard there on the hill.

A crazy man's idea, you may think, but I've known people to risk their lives for the sake of rescuing a "lucky" pin, or some such foolery.

At any rate, all at once I was able to understand almost perfectly just how Manness had felt, and I told The Duster so.

He nodded at me and seemed satisfied.

"I knew that you had a brain, old fellow," said he, "and this is another proof of it."

I couldn't tell whether he was laughing at me, or really patting me on the back. That was often the way with him. If he praised you, he seemed to be laughing at you, too; and if he laughed at you, he seemed to be praising you. If he got angry, you felt that behind the anger there really might be a great regard for you, and if he showed the least touch of affection, you kept wondering how much he scorned and despised you.

That is to say, you figured out all of these states of mind, until he hypnotized you.

Now he said to me: "I built a funeral pyre for Manness. His horse had gone dead lame. I killed the horse and I piled the wood around him, and set the saddle, and bridle, and rifle, and guns, and knife, and bed roll, and slicker, and the whole pack of Hector's stuff on the top of the big pile of wood. I worked hard for a whole day heaping up the brush.

"At last I carried Manness to the top. His eyes were open. He lay and looked at the sky while the flames whistled and roared around him.

"Then that fire burned out and I took up the ashes of Manness and carried

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them away with me, and there they are!"

With that, he pointed to a little square casket that stood on the table close to the fireplace.

I wish I never had laid eyes on it!

CHAPTER VI.

A CLEVER MOVE.

THE point of the whole of his visit to Christmas, you can see, was to force the burial of Manness in the Christmas churchyard. He already had tried several tacks with the minister, and he had been baffled each time. Besides, in the conclusion, he had simply upset Lamont and roused the Scotch fury against himself.

He had promised to call on Lamont, and right after supper that evening, he asked me to harness the horses.

I did that, and rubbed the dust off the buggy, but when I came around and stood at the head of the team he told me that I had to go with him.

"I want everybody in Christmas to see me parading around with honest old Baldy!" said he.

I explained that I wasn't as old as I looked, but he only laughed and wouldn't answer. However, there I was spinning through the alleys and up the main street of Christmas, and looking down at the wrinkling hips of the horses as they stepped out, because Duster let them fly. He had them stretching all the way, but he had them firmly and quietly in his hand, too. He was a good driver. I never hope to see a better.

No one ever told me how Thurlow got his nickname; but I've wondered if it came out of the many times he "knocked the dust out" of other people; or because of the way he used to go foaming along with his horses.

Right through the middle of the town he still kept up the pace, turning the corners so fast that the light wheels skidded with loud tremors, or the whole rig tipped violently. I wondered if The Duster really enjoyed this sort of driving, or if he were showing off to the crowd. For people ran out into the street to see us come and to watch us going.

You couldn't tell by the face of The Duster what he felt. You couldn't tell at all. He never looked sleepy, and he never looked excited; but in the midst of this dash of his through Christmas, he said to me: "Watch that man in the red shirt we just passed on our right."

I turned and saw the man behind a pillar of the veranda in front of Morley's saloon. It seemed to me as though that man were pulling a gun, but when I swung about and stared at him, he slunk off through the swinging doors of Morley's place.

"He looked like trouble," I told The Duster, "but he changed his mind."

"Well," said The Duster, "I'm not going fast enough to beat a bullet, but I may be traveling fast enough to spoil somebody's aim!"

That really put the whole thing in a nutshell. Every instant that he was in Christmas, he was in danger. In increasing danger as his enemies heard where he was, and gathered to nail him. This was so clear that I couldn't believe that he would stay long in the town.

Presently he pulled up at the minister's house, which stood on the far side of the hill on which the church had been built. That little house looked like a suffering, bare man, tied in one place, because it didn't have any cellar, but stood up from the ground on four stilts.

I never quite understood how the minister and his books and his two boys and his girl managed to cram themselves into the three rooms of that shack. Of course the boys didn't count much. They were a pair of fourteen-

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year-old twins made of leather outside and lined with steel inside. You could have chucked them over a clothes line and somehow they would have managed to have a good rest. Besides, in the warm part of the year they camped in a little tent behind the house, where they lived like a pair of Robinson Crusoes—the neighbors being the goats, if you don't mind me saying it.

What kept the minister so poor, and his kids in rags, and his beautiful girl threadbare? Charity, just charity, because that iron face of Lamont went with an open hand, and he never turned hungry people away from his door; and because he brought Christmas to a lot of homes that wouldn't have known what the name meant, except as the title of the town.

Just as we got in front of the minister's house and pulled up, there was a rattle of hoofs and one of the boys came dashing in from the pasture, bareback on a mustang that was a cross of a wild cat and a thunderbolt.

When the boy saw us—saw The Duster, I mean—he stopped that mustang with a long skid that wound up on two hind legs while the horse punched holes in the air with its forefeet. That maneuver would have slid nine people out of ten over the tail of the horse, but the boy didn't mind it a bit. He didn't seem to know he was *on* a horse, but just opened his eyes and his mouth at the great Duster.

We were getting out of the rig, in the meantime, and The Duster says in his quiet, pleasant voice: "Aren't you Tom Lamont?"

The boy had flashed off the back of his pony by this time. The horse tried to snap his head off, but without so much as looking aside this kid took a twist on the jaw of the brute and made it stand quiet as a lamb.

"Yes, sir!" said he. "I'm Tom Lamont. But how—how could you tell me from my brother, sir?"

It gave me a funny feeling to see that wild young Westerner talking good English, and polite, and throwing in his "sirs" so regularly. But that was the hand of the minister, of course. I looked aside at The Duster, wondering what he could possibly know about the boys, but he said at once: "I knew, of course, what everybody knows: That Tom Lamont is the great rider."

The youngster turned as pink as a girl. He was so pleased he could hardly speak. He managed to say: "I'm not much good. But I can't shoot like Billy."

"You can learn," said The Duster.

Tom swallowed twice, with his eyes like saucers. He was fairly shaking with excitement.

"I could learn from you, sir," says he.

"Do you think you could?" says The Duster, very gently. "Nothing would please me more than to show you whatever I know."

"Do you mean that, sir?" says Tom.

"I mean it, every word. You can drop around at my place any time."

That was too much for Tom. He dragged down a great breath; he had to hang onto the reins to keep himself steady, and as The Duster walked down the path toward the door of the shack, Tom turned and stared after him.

No matter what the head of the house thought of The Duster, it was pretty plain that to this lad he was a hero—a regular Alexander the Great.

Perhaps I'm judging by the light of what I knew afterward to be the fact, but even at that moment an idea knocked at my brain, so to speak, and told me that The Duster might try to use his hold on this boy against the minister.

It turned my blood cold, that idea. It turns it cold still, even to think.

We were almost to the door when it was snatched open and a burst of song came thrilling at us, and with the

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song came Marguerite Lamont, and her gray-blue eyes all lighted, her cheeks flushed.

She saw us suddenly and stopped with one foot on the ground and the other on the last step. She made a little movement aside, and if she had been a year younger, I think she would have turned and bolted back into the house.

How I wish that she had!

But now The Duster had his hat off, and was bowing to her, and was saying that he hoped it was proper for him to come at this time, and that he trusted she would use her influence with the minister to persuade him to permit The Duster to talk to him.

That was the way he carried on, in a low, confidential voice, as though he were talking over a thing in which she had an interest, and as though he looked up to her for advice and guidance in this business.

I had another qualm as I saw her eyes fluttering up to the face of The Duster and back again to the toes of his boots, but I argued myself out of the idea by restating some of the facts of the case. In the first place, The Duster wasn't any beauty. Those keen, strong eyes of his were really like a pair of headlights warning any reasonable human being of danger coming. Besides, he was a known gambler, yegg, and gunman. That very day he had been denounced by Lamont himself in the church.

I added up those facts, and for a sum total told myself that she must look on The Duster as a fiend.

As if women ever were logical! The nicer, the prettier, the sweeter they are, the harder they hunt for a good solid chance to throw themselves away and break their hearts.

She managed to say that she was sure her father would see him at once; she would ask.

So she went inside and we could hear the murmur and the fall of her voice. It was a low-pitched, rather throaty voice; you could listen to it with a physical pleasure, quite aside from any music in it.

A rumble answered her.

That would be the minister, and a second later we heard a book slammed, the floor trampled, and Lamont came into the doorway. He did not pause there, but like a true fighting man, he came straight on down the steps and into the path.

His face was red with anger, as it had been in the church, and he glared at The Duster, so that I thought of an old hen ruffling feathers, waving wings, and scolding at a hawk—a hawk that said nothing, mind you, and never would, until it whistled downward to strike.

A brave man and a strong man was the minister, but somehow that comparison stuck in my mind. He had better challenge the Old Nick than challenge The Duster!

Because no good man stands a fair chance against a bad one.

"I came to ask if you are willing to talk to me," says The Duster.

He had put his hat back on his head when the girl went inside and now as he said this, he deliberately took it off again.

A mighty clever move, because it was as though he put the minister on a higher plane than himself—as a man of the church, as a wiser man. He put him, in fact, as high as a woman!

A clever move, but it didn't work with old Lamont.

CHAPTER VII.

A MOCKER AND SCORNER.

"HAVE you come here to mock and scorn?" said Lamont, in a voice big enough to have scared a congregation of ten thousand.

"I've come to you like a sick man to

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a doctor," said The Duster. "If you will——"

"Sick, sick!" thundered Lamont. "But I know that there's a sickness of yours which only fire can heal, and which fire will purge at last!"

The Duster stirred a little at this, but he kept his head bowed and looked down at the feet of the preacher. Inside the doorway, where she had shrunk, I saw Marguerite standing again, and I knew that she was drinking in everything that was said, and she was marveling, I suppose, at the humility of this famous Duster, come here to swallow abuse.

"I understood," says The Duster, "that there is always time for a man to repent."

"There is always time for a man to be a hypocrite," said the minister, "for the sake of pulling the wool over the eyes of a whole congregation. There is always time for canting, ranting treachery, and for wolves in sheep's clothing!"

He advanced a little as he said this, shaking his fist in the air.

"I know you, young man," said he, "and I know no good about you. Heaven forgive those who are led into sin by temptation which they cannot overcome, but you are one of the people whose eyes are open and who select the way of evil because you love evil. You have come into my church to flout me, and you have come to my home to insult me, but I fear you no more than I would fear Satan himself!"

You see that Lamont was proud, which is a dangerous way for a man to be. He had reasons for pride, too. That is to say, he was without fear, he was willing to lay down his life for the sake of the principles that he loved, and all his life he had done nothing but work for the good of others. He saw the right way so clearly that he could not believe there was any proper path in the world for a man to walk except his own way. Well, it's all very well for a man to be confident in his own strength and in his own virtue, but I don't suppose that anybody ought to ask trouble to come up and fight, because trouble is likely to do so. They say out West that there's no horse a man can't ride and no man a horse can't throw. The minute that I heard Lamont talk like this, I knew that he was in to find trouble; I only could not tell from what direction the lightning would strike.

In spite of this outbreak from Lamont, The Duster did not show the slightest temper in return. He kept the same position of humility, with his hat in his hand and his eyes usually fixed on the ground. If he had raised them, even a hot-headed man like the minister would have thought twice, I suppose.

Said the terrible Duster: "Mr. Lamont, there is such a thing as Christian charity. I've come here to ask——"

"You've come here on a ten-thousand-dollar bet that you'll bury the ashes of Hector Manness in the holy ground on this hill, but I tell you, my man, that you can't pull the wool over my eyes. I thank the Providence who lets me see through your designs. Now, leave this house and never come back!"

"Lamont," said The Duster with wonderful solemnity, "I've come here to bury the ashes of a dead friend. I thought it was a good thing to do; and you've whipped me and beaten me with your words. I come crawling back to your feet and ask you to hear me. I've tried to speak to you alone, but you've forced me to humiliate myself in the presence of others—your daughter, your son, and my friend, here. You're a hard man, Lamont, and you're whipping my heart as I would not whip a horse!"

"I listen to a liar speak," said the minister. "And I see the lie as well as hear it."

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"Lamont," said The Duster, "I came here to bury my friend; and I also hoped that I could learn a new way of life in Christmas! Are you going to shut the door in my face and keep me back in the other way of living?"

"Bah!" snorted Lamont. "Am I the only minister in the world?"

"You're the only minister in Christmas," said The Duster, and this was so true that, in its very naked simplicity, it seemed to mean something.

Besides, I suddenly wondered if The Duster would be true to what he said. Not that I expected him really to reform, but still one never could be sure about that fellow. I would rather try to follow a teal in flight than to understand the twists and the turnings of John Penny Thurlow, as he called himself.

"I'll have no more words with you," said the minister. "I'll have no more dealings with you, and I'm best pleased if I never lay eyes on you or anything about you, except the news that you've received the reward for your evil in the end. Thurlow, leave my sight!"

The Duster heaved his shoulders once, as though the sigh came out of his heart as he listened to this.

Then he said in a low voice: "Heaven forgive you, Lamont!"

Of course that was too much. It showed me suddenly that all his attitude of humility had been a fake from the start and that he was only playing a part, but I wondered at such a raw fake in The Duster, who was capable of being such a clever actor that I couldn't see through him at all.

Heaven forgive him!

That was entirely too much, and I could have laughed at the whole scene, except that I got to figuring the thing out. What The Duster had said and the part he played had not fooled the minister, and it had not fooled me. Then whose eyes was he blinding?

Why, the girl and the boy, of course!

Young Tom Lamont was standing by with tears in his eyes, at the sight of the humiliation and the agony of this great man! And yonder was the girl in the door of the house.

Tears in her eyes?

Yes, sir, those tears were actually running down her face, the little simpleton! She had been drawn a shade closer to the door, so that I could see her clear.

It was on the youngsters, then, that The Duster had tried to make an impression, and he certainly had succeeded, though what he had in mind I couldn't tell.

When he had got out his "Heaven forgive you!" he turned around and put a hand on my arm and walked toward the buggy uncertainly, as though he had been staggered. He went past the boy, who stood by fumbling at his throat, pretty nearly choked with grief, I suppose, and with sympathy, and with pity for the terrible Duster, who had killed so many men, but who could be lashed to the mast and tortured by the words of an unarmed minister of the Gospel.

Well, I didn't do any pitying of The Duster. I only hoped that poor Lamont wouldn't find no ground under his feet, one of these days, and I was still hoping that when he booms after me:

"Baldy Wye!"

"Aye, sir," said I, turning around.

"Baldy," says he, "there's no man on this range that has a better name than Wye for honesty and straightforwardness and trustworthiness. Are you going to throw all those good qualities away for the high pay given by a ruffian and thief?"

It made me mad. Particularly because I couldn't help feeling that there was something guilty about taking ten dollars a day in pay, that being more than three times what I was worth to anybody.

So out I roared at him:

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"Lamont, I don't need a preacher to be teaching me the way I want to live and what's right and wrong!"

"Ha?" says the preacher, with a shout of anger.

"I've as good a notion of right and wrong as any minister in the world," says I.

"Hush, hush, Baldy," says The Duster, beside me.

And he put a hand on my shoulder, as though he wanted to stop me from talking. The scoundrel! When he could barely fight back the smile from his lips and couldn't begin to keep his delight out of his eyes.

"Hush, hush, Baldy," says The Duster, "and don't be letting me poison your life. You're free to leave me, Baldy," says he, with another hypocritical sigh, "if I'm doing you a wrong, Baldy!"

I wanted to punch him—if it hadn't been like hitting a bear that was set for trouble.

"The heart that holds pride holds evil!" thunders Lamont. "Baldy Wye, be careful of what you do. No man is old enough to be absolutely sure of himself!"

"Confound you!" I yelled back at him, driven pretty furious, between him on the one side, and my knowledge that I was helping out The Duster on the other—and not wanting to help him at all, mind you—and so I broke out like this: "Keep your tongue to yourself, you danged word-maker; you and all the rest of your tribe do more trouble than you do good!"

I thought that Lamont would plain explode at this. He doubled up his fists, and I think that in another minute he would have been at me. And he was able to give me a tough time of it, too!

Now, when this happened, The Duster grabbed me, and he pulled me toward the buggy and turned me around, saying in a very loud voice: "Baldy, Baldy, for Heaven's sake remember that you're talking to a minister and a man of God!"

Bosh!

Think of him talking like that—The Duster! Of course he was delighted that the row had started. It gave him a chance to look like the mildest, most controlled man in the world, and it made Lamont and me look like a pair of fools.

In the midst of all this, Lamont got hold of himself and at least kept from saying any more to me, while we climbed into the buggy.

"Baldy, will you drive?" says The Duster.

I did it, not thinking, blindly.

And, by gosh! he used that chance to press a hand across his eyes, and so go off in that way, as though he had been staggered and just about blinded by the terrible scene that he had gone through and all the words that had been thrown at him.

Then I saw that he was suffering. He was fairly quivering with pain from head to foot, and when I looked at his face, it seemed to me that his eyes were bursting out of his head with some great emotion, and his mouth was pinched and pale with it.

Then I understood.

It nearly killed him to sit there and keep in the laughter that was exploding in him!

CHAPTER VIII.

RENNEY COMES AND GOES.

THINKING about how I had been twisted around his finger and used all through this affair, and thinking also what a terrible fool I had made of myself for the benefit of The Duster, I got angrier than I ever had been in my life, and I got back to the Ridley house almost as fast as The Duster had come from it. When we arrived, I said: "I'm through. I quit right here."

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"You don't mean it," said The Duster. "You wouldn't turn me down flat, Baldy?"

"I would and I do," said I. "You've got some sort of mischief working in you, and that's the end of it. Whatever your scheme is, I'm not going to help you."

"I didn't ask you to. I ask for your companionship, and that's all, and the support of your honest name, Baldy, which I promise you that I won't taint the least bit."

"Companionship!" said I.

"I'm fond of you, old-timer, and that's a fact," said he.

"They made a grand liar when they made you," I told him.

"Check," said The Duster, without hesitation, "but just now I'm telling the truth, partly."

He put that in with a smile, and it was sort of an appeal to me, because it made a concession and admitted that he couldn't pull the wool over my eyes all the time.

"What's in your mind about the boy?" I asked him, point-blank.

"I want the kid to help by persuading his father that there's no particular sin in letting what's left of Manness sleep in the cemetery over there."

"And what about the girl?"

"I want her help even more, and for the same thing."

"D'you mean that?" I asked, trying to search his eyes.

I might as well have tried to search the bottom of the ocean.

"I mean it," said he.

Well, it was evening, and that's a time when it's hard to hold a grudge, out West. I could see the cattle trooping down to the river to drink. And it pleased me a good deal to watch them, considering the deserts and the hard ranges I've ridden, where a cow gets a drink about once a week. I watched the green hills and the tree shadows floating down in the rosy and golden water and the meanness went out of me.

Perhaps The Duster saw this, because he went on: "I'll tell you what, Baldy. No man ever needed help more than I need it, trying to go straight."

"Bosh!" said I.

"Let me put it this way, if you won't believe the other thing," he went on. "Has Lamont really a right to keep poor Manness from sleeping where he wants to sleep?"

And he pointed to the box that held the ashes.

That was a pretty convincing stroke, because every time that I looked at it, my mind went back to the picture he had drawn of the death of Manness, and that was so pathetic and so real, that I could almost see the flames climbing up into the sky. It seemed to me, too, that no matter what Manness had been, there was enough in the friendship between him and The Duster to forgive a good share of his sins. Anyway, he was dead, and if what some people thought was true, he was getting plenty for his sins in another world.

I had to admit that I thought The Duster was right, and that the minister, at any rate, was the last man who ought to help punish a dead man.

"Then," says The Duster, "I want you to promise to stay by me in this job to the end."

"I do promise!" said I.

It broke out of me, do you see? I didn't really want to say that, but somehow the words came.

He took me right up before I could change my mind and my words.

"Thanks," said The Duster solemnly. "I don't need anything more than that from you, Baldy, because I know you've never broken your word in your life."

That wasn't quite true, but take it by and large, I suppose that I've tried to live up to my word as much as most

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men. And if you want the truth, I've always been as proud of being called honest as most men are proud of being called brave, or good riders, or any of those things.

"I'm to stay on until you've got the ashes buried, am I?" I said with a growl.

"That's it," answered The Duster, and even by that dim light, I could see a twinkle in his eyes that made me pretty uneasy. However, the thing that meant more than anything else to me was that the preacher had seemed so much in the wrong.

"Well, I'll go and try to take a turn with Lamont myself," said I.

"Do that!" said The Duster, dropping a hand on my shoulder.

I shrugged the hand off.

"Confound you, Duster," said I, "the fact is that I about two thirds disbelieve in everything you tell me. But the other third of you is such a dangerous and amusing rascal that I can't help sort of liking you, and that's the fact."

"Thanks," said The Duster. "I'm grateful for that, old-timer. And if you——"

He broke off here and jumped sidewise the width of that room, where we were talking. He landed on the floor face down, with no more sound than a cat would make in jumping off the back of a chair, and I saw the glitter of the revolver that he stretched out before him, pointing toward the door.

He had moved just about as fast as I could think, and then I saw a shadow sway into the doorway——

"Stand fast!" said The Duster. "Stand fast, Renney, or I'll blow your head off!"

The shadow at the door swayed back, steadied, and then seemed to lift arms above its head.

"Don't move," went on The Duster, getting up from the floor.

He sneaked forward like a cat and pretty soon there he was in the door, poking his gun into the stomach of the shadow.

"Light a lamp, Baldy!" he called over to me.

I did that, and when the lamp was lighted, I saw a slim, worn-looking man with his arms rigidly held above his head. He was rigid with fear, all over, and yet there was courage in that face, too. I looked at him again, and then I knew Steve Renney, as good a rider, as wise a head on the trails, and just about as fine a shot as I ever ran into in all my days.

He stood there like a man made of paper, expecting to be touched with a match's flame.

"What's it all about, Steve?" I asked.

He didn't even answer me, that's how terribly hard he had concentrated on The Duster.

For that matter, I really didn't need an out-and-out answer, for there was hardly a man on the range who didn't know that for five or six years, at the least, Renney had been following The Duster, off and on, and no less than four times he had supplied the evidence against The Duster at trials.

"Now, Renney!" said The Duster through his teeth, purring like a cat. "You can talk, now. Say your last words, Renney."

Renney did not smile, but he said quietly: "I know you don't kill—when there are witnesses around, Duster. Or unless the other fellow is the attacking agent!"

He did smile as he finished.

I began to guess that he was not tense with fear so much as with a vast desire to make the most out of this situation.

"You've come sneaking to my door. I should have killed you then, but I was sort of minded to see your face when a gun was in your stomach, old son! I've seen it—and it's a picture. But what a simpleton you were, Renney, to be pulled in by the talk I was

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having, and by the fact that my back was turned to the door! As if I would keep my back turned on any door, Renney, so long as you and half a hundred other hired law-dogs are hunting for me!"

He laughed.

I never heard anything like that laughter of The Duster's, it was so exultant, so beastly savage, with a snarl in it. Ordinarily, he was so smooth and gentle that you could only guess at the worst of him, but now the whole picture was suggested under my eyes.

"I don't deny that I wanted to have a quiet look at you, Duster," said Renney. "But the fact is that I ain't so much fool as to come right into your doorway if I hadn't had another thing on my mind."

"What's that?" asked The Duster, in an impatient sort of way.

"I've been off your trail for some time, Duster," said Renney. "Except where it crossed and tangled up with that of your friend, Manness. He's my meat, now. And I've come to talk to you about him."

"Talk away," said The Duster.

"Alone, Duster."

"This is Baldy. There's nothing you can say to me that I'd keep from Baldy Wye."

The sheriff gave me a look and a nod.

"Duster, the only way that I can get Manness is through you, it looks like."

"D'you aim to think that I'll help you?"

"I do. Manness tried to double cross you only a couple of months ago. Why shouldn't you help me against him now? The first time there's a pinch, Manness will sure fix you, old son!"

"Manness will never double cross me again," said The Duster. "There he is in that box."

The sheriff blinked like an owl.

"Whatever he tried to do," went on The Duster, "he died my friend, Renney. And that's the end. My job is to get permission to bury his bones in the Christmas cemetery."

"How do I know," said Renney, "that Manness really is dead and that those bones aren't a fake?"

The Duster hesitated.

"You remember there was a bullet lodged in the thigh of Manness? Then look here!"

He let the sheriff put down his hands, and crossing to the box, he opened it. It gave me the horrors to see the casual way he did it, but Renney was mighty interested and looked in for quite a while. Then he nodded and stepped back.

"I'm glad that he's gone," said he. "Because he's cost me a good many hundreds of hours, Duster."

"You can pay more attention to me, after this," replied The Duster with a sneer. "Now get out of here, Renney. And in the final count, mind you that I've had you with your back against the wall, and let you go!"

Renney didn't wait for two invitations. He left at once, backing through the door, and then hurrying off into the thick of the night.

CHAPTER IX.

LIKE A CAT WITH A BIRD.

WHEN I look back, it's easy to see that The Duster had planned everything carefully from the beginning, though he contrived to make it all seem casual and by chance.

That same night, the editor of the Christmas *Appeal* came up to interview him, and The Duster did a little talking. Not much, but it was mighty clever.

He said: "Mr. Heron, I know why you're here, well enough. But if you ask me about my own life, what am I to say? You don't want me to lie to you and tell you that I've been a good man all my life. And you can't very

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well expect me to tell you the truth about the shadowy things I've done."

That was frank, and the editor said: "Well, is it true that you're only here to bury the bones of Manness?"

"To the public that's my reason for being here. To you, I'd add something else, confidentially."

It flattered Heron to be talked to like that, because he was a pretty young man. He said at once that he would keep the thing quiet, no matter what happened.

"The fact is that I'm trying to go straight," said The Duster.

It nearly floored Heron. He begged The Duster to let him write that up, because he said it would make a story that would be copied all over the country.

"I don't want you to use it," said The Duster. "I hate a man who fails to keep his promise, and I'm not announcing any reform until I've proved that I can stick to it."

Heron shook hands with him warmly, congratulated him, and swore that The Duster could accomplish anything he set out to do. I felt exactly the same way about it, but I was only two per cent sure that he really was interested in reforming himself. From the first I suspected that he was mixed up in some really big crooked scheme, though, of course, I couldn't spot its nature.

Then the editor asked him some typical newspaper questions, such as what was his best job with shooting irons, the most dangerous moment in his life, and all that sort of thing, which The Duster answered patiently, but asked Heron not to print them.

Heron promised, but he did not keep his promise. The next morning the paper was out with a big front-page headline about the coming of the great Duster to Christmas, and then it went on to talk about his career, not in quotes, but as though everybody already knew the things that Duster had told of the day before. They did know, in fact, most of the chief heads, but they didn't know the details that made that news story such a success.

The editor, of course, said that a mistake had been made and that when he gave in the story to the rewrite man, he had handed him by mistake all the notes which he had taken during the interview.

However that might be, the story had enough in it to be copied everywhere, and I suppose that there was hardly a journal in the United States that did not carry a few sticks about the life and exploits of The Duster. And every one wondered, somewhere in their articles, if The Duster really was in Christmas in an attempt to go straight?

That question he only answered to the editor, but to others, he maintained a cheerful silence which enabled them to use their imaginations. Undoubtedly the newspaper talk raised The Duster in the minds of the people of Christmas a good deal, because they knew that the whole land was talking about him, and that made every one feel a shade more important.

I felt the same way, for that matter.

The morning after Duster appeared, just as the paper was distributed in the town, he went for a walk with me, avoiding the center of the village because he said that he didn't want to be recognized and pointed out too much.

"Suppose I don't succeed in this job? Suppose I don't manage to stay straight, well, it won't help me a tremendous lot in the old life to have every one know exactly what my face is like!"

"Go straight!" said I. "Any snake in the world can lay a straighter trail than yours!"

He only laughed.

We went on that morning around the southern edge of the town and away from the river, where it gets pretty hot in the summer, without much air

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stirring. That's why land and shacks are cheap in that part of the town, and we soon saw a lot of the old sour doughs lounging around in their shacks, or sitting in the doorways. For Christmas was always a sort of a dumping ground for the worn-out prospectors, cow-punchers who had lost their nerve, broken-down lumber men, men who'd had a touch of the heat in the desert, and all sorts of people who were busted up in life and still had to work some, but who wanted a pleasant place to settle down in. Every one felt that Christmas was about as pleasant a place as you could find on the range, and therefore the town was filled with people like that.

The Duster recognized some of these fellows. He had a photographic memory which never failed to register everything that came in range of him. He stopped and talked to the ones he knew, and always asked what they were doing and appeared so interested that they told him the facts. One fellow with a squint in one eye and a limp in one leg, pulled him aside and told him some wonderful story about a lost mine in the Christmas Hills. The Duster gave that old-timer fifty dollars to finish fitting out a pack, but he wouldn't look on that as a grubstake.

"You pay me back after you've got the mine working," said he.

He handed out a couple more slices of money, here and there, because most of those fellows were so broke that they would pretty near have absorbed the gold out of the rocks.

Then as he walked on with me, he told me to keep my eyes open, and when I spotted a good fellow in trouble, to let him know.

"What are you going to win by this?" I asked The Duster.

He shook his head at me.

"What could I gain except a little pleasure in helping out the poor fellows?" said he. "Baldy, are you always going to doubt me for everything that I do?"

He could be pretty pathetic, when he chose, but that didn't bother me.

One thing at least he gained out of his charity to the broken sour doughs and run-down punchers. There were always a few of them cruising around the Ridley house, after that. Not coming over to ask for charity right out, you understand, but just putting themselves to the windward of a chance for a good talk with The Duster.

And that habit cost him money, of course. He seemed able to spread out his coin, however. To some people he gave thirty or forty dollars, and those people never came back to ask for more, but they blessed him with their eyes whenever they saw him pass. And to others, he would dole out just a few dollars at a time, sort of stringing them along. In this way, it was no time before "broke town," as the rest of Christmas called the section of shacks, was willing to vote for The Duster on almost any sort of a proposition.

But I think that what he gained, most of all, and what he had planned on most of all, was that same constant cruising of people around the Ridley house. Because those fellows were friendly, and they would have liked nothing so well as to blow to bits any crook or police officer, for that matter, who tried to get into trouble with The Duster. They were such a good guard that after a while I stopped worrying about The Duster's enemies—he had put up such a good strong shield of friends in almost no time!

That was a clever thing in him, any way you look at it. But the way that he handled the up-stage townsmen was just as smart. He knew a good many of these people before he came to the town, but he never would speak to any of them in the street unless they made it clear that they wanted him to. I heard several of those men stop and

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ask The Duster if he had forgotten them, and he would say something like this, looking at them very gravely: "A fellow doesn't forget a man like you, Smith. But I wasn't sure that you would care to remember me, after the minister publicly disgraced me—to say nothing of the rest of my reputation."

He didn't whine, mind you, as he said these things, but he spoke so quietly and heartily that nearly every time the other fellow would shake hands with him again, in order to assure him that he was a friend of his and didn't care about the past record of The Duster, and for that matter, maybe The Duster had as good a record as most; and as for the minister, he couldn't disgrace such a big man as The Duster—ten ministers like Lamont couldn't disgrace him. For his part, Smith was glad to see The Duster in town, and things would undoubtedly go better with him hereafter, and he trusted that Duster would come to dinner that same night.

But The Duster used to answer that he was mighty honored. Then he would edge the other fellow away a bit and say to him privately and deeply:

"I don't want to spend too much time in the houses of honest men, Smith. I don't want to do that until I've stayed here longer, and have tested myself out. Crime is a poisonous temptation, Smith, and I've got to prove that I'm worthy of conversation with decent men and women before I go about much."

That was just the line for him to take in order to have everybody feel puffed.

"There's something about me that The Duster likes and respects," was what their faces said as they walked away, and I know that every one began to comment on The Duster and say how really modest he was, and confound a man like Lamont who wouldn't let a dog try to swim to shore, and how really strong The Duster was.

Oh, he was strong, all right. He was strong enough to handle them as a cat handles birds. I knew it even when I couldn't see his deceit or the point to be gained by it. I knew it profoundly, and used to sometimes point a finger at him, and see him smile, admitting that I was right.

"However," he used to say, "maybe I can fool you yet!"

Maybe he could? I set myself to be as sharp as a needle in probing his ideas and his ways, but just the same I couldn't fathom a great deal of The Duster. He was too much for me, as I've said before.

I must not go too far before I tell the results of that interview I had with Lamont on Monday. It had a good deal of bearing on the things that happened afterward.

But in speaking of Duster's attitude in general, I ought not to finish before pointing out that whenever anybody mentioned the name of Manness, The Duster didn't complain about the cruelty of Lamont, but he would change his voice, lower his eyes, and start talking about something else, as though he were too much moved by the mere name of his dead friend to endure it.

CHAPTER X.

TROUBLE BREWING.

AFTER making the tour of the town that Monday morning, I went straight over to the minister's house and found him working in the vegetable patch with his sleeves rolled over his hairy forearms to the elbow and perspiration streaming down his face. He certainly looked a man, just then.

I had ridden Dolly over, and when he saw me climbing down out of the saddle, he came to me at once and held out his hand. It was a regular paw. I was glad to shake it, but he nearly broke my fingers for me.

"I was an old fool, yesterday," said

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Lamont. "I want to tell you that I'm sorry, Baldy, and ask you to pardon me for forgetting myself that way!"

I slapped him on the shoulder.

"The old friends are the only good friends," I told him. "You don't have to apologize to me. I said a lot more than you did."

"I ordered you away from my house," said Lamont with a grin. "I never meant that, Baldy, and you know it."

"I know it now," said I. "You don't have to think about it any more."

"That hypocritical scoundrel, Thurlow, as he calls himself, got me so angry that I would have raged at my own girl, I suppose."

That wasn't as good as the first part of my reception, but I put it off as well as I could.

"She's a fine, upstanding girl," said I to Lamont.

"Her? She wouldn't stand up to a mouse," said the minister. "But whatever she is, she's true, may Heaven bless her! I'm glad you came over here this morning, Baldy. We can have a talk about the old times and forget these scoundrels like the robber and murderer, Duster."

"I want to talk to you about a worse man than The Duster ever was," says I, seeing that I would have to take the bull by the horns.

He glowered at me for a minute, and then he said: "Are you going to make trouble for me, Baldy?"

"I hope not," said I. "But for old time's sake, I hope that you'll listen to me!"

"I'll listen to you from now to the end of the world," said he. "Come into the shade."

We went in under the eaves of the house, and there we stood in the shade, but with no wind touching us, and my shirt beginning to stick to my shoulders, it was so hot. I remember that a cow was bawling somewhere on the edge of the hills and making the whole valley mournful with her tune.

"Who is on your mind?" asked Lamont.

"Manness," said I, and waited for the explosion.

It did not come. Lamont merely nodded and spoke almost as much to himself as to me when he answered: "You see how it is with me, Baldy? I don't even know for sure that the ashes are the ashes of Manness. There's no doctor's certificate. I stand inside of my rights in keeping the man from being buried there. It may seem to you a hard thing to do, but I hate crime and criminals, Baldy. All my life I've been fighting against creatures like Manness and that supervillain, The Duster. Now am I to begin opening the cemetery to them? We've had no ruffians buried there. We've had the clean and decent men and women of the town there. Besides, there's no reason why he shouldn't go to any other church, where they're not so particular. You'll have to admit that, Baldy!"

"It's because Manness died begging to be buried in that place."

"Did he? I doubt that. I'm not callin' you a liar, Baldy, but still I doubt that about Manness dying and begging to be allowed to be buried in my churchyard or in any other churchyard."

"I've heard The Duster say so, and in a way that I had to believe," I told him.

"I know you believe it, or you wouldn't be saying it to me now. But you're an honest man, Baldy, and you don't know the ways of the wicked people as I do. I've had to study them and fight them all the days of my life."

"The way I look at it," said I, "I don't see what's to be gained by that Duster, even if he does get the bones of his friend buried there on the side of the hill."

"I don't know what he gains, exactly,

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either," said Lamont, "and that's part of the point. If I knew the scoundrel's game, I wouldn't be so afraid of it; but one thing I know, and that is that he doesn't mean well, and that he won't fail to get some advantage out of this deal he is making. What advantage I don't know, but I refuse to make my church a stamping ground for hypocrites and their games."

I was even more convinced by his manner of saying this than by the words themselves, because he put a very great deal of quiet earnestness into his voice, and I knew that he would never be moved except by some great power.

"I wanted to say one thing to you," said I. "Whatever The Duster starts for, he tries for with his whole might, and you have to keep in mind that it's no big loss except to your pride if you let him bury Manness in the churchyard."

This seemed to move him a great deal, for he sighed and struck a fist against his wrinkled forehead.

"Aye, pride, pride is the sin that troubles me most, Baldy. Heaven forgive me for it! I was on the verge of going to ask the forgiveness of The Duster openly before the public, and I would do that—not for my decision against him, but for the excess of my words against him, do you see?"

I could see. He was ashamed of himself, and he wanted to make some amends to The Duster, though he wouldn't change his decision.

"But now," says Lamont, "you can take him the message for me—and—and"—he went on with an effort—"you can repeat it in just as public a place as you want!"

"I wouldn't have the shaming of you, man," said I, "for the sake of one like The Duster. Certainly not! But I'll tell him privately what you have to say."

"Your way will be the best way," says Lamont. "Is it true that you're working for him?"

"Aye, it's true."

He was about to make a sharp answer, but then he controlled himself and simply said: "Whatever you do will be right for yourself and others, Baldy. You're a man I trust!"

I knew that was a good deal from him, considering what had gone before, and I thanked him from my heart. Still, I was badly troubled, because I could see that there were stormy times ahead, what with the strange determination of The Duster to get those ashes buried in the accepted ground of the church cemetery, and what with Lamont's resolution against it. They were both strong. Indeed, Lamont was a regular bull. But a tiger will kill a bull!

I was about to go back to the Ridley house, when Lamont called out: "Hey, Margie, Margie!"

Marguerite came hurrying to the back door and looked out at us, and smiled at me.

"Give Baldy one of those loganberry pies," said he.

She went to get it, and Lamont said: "You can tell The Duster that it won't poison him, anyway."

That was the sacrifice that Lamont made to atone for his rudeness to The Duster, and somehow it made me sad, for I could guess that if The Duster ever had him at an advantage, there would be no mercy in those cold, bright eyes of his.

She brought the pie out in its tin, wrapped with brown paper, and a string to hold it by. It would be better warmed up, but cold with milk it would be good, too, she told me.

"The Duster is mighty fond of pies," I said, and looked straight at her.

Well, it made me pretty sick to see her wince a little, and flush. I glanced aside at her father, but though he was staring full at her, I could see that

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there was so much love in his eyes that he would notice nothing.

So I went off back to the Ridley house, and as I came close to it, I heard a sound of firing behind the place.

"The Duster is wild at last!" I told myself.

And I got out my old .44 and went ramping out behind the house to hunt up the mischief among the trees, though what side I was to be on I did not quite know. You can see what a mixed state of mind I was in.

But there I saw on the far side of the oaks young Tom Lamont standing off with a revolver in his hand, and The Duster beside him, telling him how to handle the gun. No better teacher in the world, I suppose!

They had a broad blaze on a tree for a target, and just now Tommy let fly and must have hit the target, for The Duster said: "That's enough! You've dropped him this time!"

And Tommy grinned as though he had heard a voice from Heaven.

I heard The Duster go on: "A sure shot is worth ten of your fast ones. The fast gun fighter plows up the floor and breaks the windows and the ceiling, but he's not likely to bring down his man. The fellow who starts by being sure can get the speed by degrees. It's no good being lightning fast if you can't hit your target. Now you, Tommy, are going to be the sure kind, before I'm through with you."

"Am I?" says Tommy, worshiping the great Duster with his eyes.

"Of course you are. You've got a natural talent, and I'm going to bring it out. In a week it'll be a terrible fool who tries to bully you, Tom."

Tom took a breath that made his chest stick out like a pouter pigeon's.

"You're mighty kind to me, sir," says Tommy.

The Duster dropped a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"I've had enough experience in the world to tell a man when I see one," said he. "You're a man already, Tommy, and when you get your size, you'll be a man and a half. That's sure."

They came back slowly toward the house, and as they came, The Duster began to sing softly:

"I'll sing you a song of Billy the Kid;
I'll sing of the desperate things that he did;
'Way out in New Mexico, long, long ago,
When a man's only law was his own forty-fo',

"When Billy the Kid was a very young lad,
In old Silver City he went to the bad,
Right out in the street with a gun in his hand,
At the age of twelve years, when he killed his
first man."

So they went on toward the house, with the hand of Duster still on Tom's shoulder, and the song of The Duster trailing back to me among the trees.

I knew that the mischief was up, but what could I do?

CHAPTER XI.

FINGERS IN THE PIE.

THE boy went right on home, and when he had left the Ridley house, I went on into it and saw The Duster sitting in a far corner of the room, with his chin on one fist, while he looked at the distance. He started when he saw me and asked me what had been the result of my interview with old Lamont. I told him briefly what had happened and that Lamont had made friends with me but had persisted in a bitter hatred of him and all his ways and kind.

"Very tough old fellow," says The Duster in answer to me. "We're going to have a war that will be worth watching. Who will win, Baldy?"

"You'll never down him without murdering him," I told The Duster, "even if you turn his own children against him."

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He drummed the tips of his fingers rapidly together and looked at me thoughtfully above them.

"Tut, tut, Baldy," he said. "You ought not to make me a creature with cloven hoofs, and all. Leave something human to me!"

"I couldn't answer that. I merely snorted and pointed to the pie which Lamont had sent by way of amends to the gunman. You never could tell what would strike The Duster most hard. He got up and went to the pie. He leaned over it and breathed the fragrance of the berries and the baking.

"Beautiful Marguerite made it, of course," said he.

"Beautiful Marguerite made it," said I, pretty dryly.

"She picked the berries, most likely," said he. "She picked the berries, while the sun poured over her, scalding her shoulders; in the dust and the thorns she picked the berries, while the wasps rose into her frightened face, Baldy, eh?"

"Oh, rot!" said I.

I was interested, nevertheless, because it was a new mood to see him in.

"Then she carried the bucket of berries back to the house, and hulled away the green stems that still clung, here and there. She hulled them away, and washed the dust from her berries, and tossed them a bit in the air, not hard enough to bruise the big, tender, wine-filled grains, but enough to let the air pass through and dry them. She tossed them, and then she washed the stain of the blood of the berries from her fingers. She couldn't succeed altogether, however. Some stain remained around the cuticle of the nails.

"With those stained hands, Baldy, now you see her mix the dough for the pie crust. Nothing is more difficult to do well. The shortening must be put in in sufficient quantities—but not enough, say, to leave a horrible sense of lard in your mouth after you've eaten a bite. But the shortening is worked in, and the crust is rolled out. Now she greases the bottom of the pie tin, now she spreads the thin bottom layer. Now she packs in the berries closely, not stewing them first, but in great thick layers she spreads them, and mixes with them a few herbs known only to her—or perhaps gathered by her from some ancient family tradition—what would you say to that, Baldy?"

"I say I never heard such rot," said I. "What are you leading to?"

He went on without heeding me:

"She puts in the layers of berries, and the layers of spiced sugar, alternately. She builds up the body of the pie to a huge pile that threatens to overflow the edges of the tin—and then she adds the top layer of the crust, a differently tempered and flavored crust, is this. See where she dimpled it down to the edges of the tin with her own small and careful fingers, and here she cut the air holes, so that the seething mass of berries will be able to breathe.

"The oven, in the meantime, is made furiously hot. The reek of heat passes through the kitchen, and opening the door of the oven, with the great pie poised, she feels a blast like flame, invisible, burning against her knees, and pouring up the sleeves of her dress. However, into that furnace she thrusts the pie which she has made with such tender care.

"She stands back, thoughtfully, aware of what is happening. She knows that the layers of sugar are being drenched by the juice of the berries, and the rich liquid then is melting and boiling. She knows that the burned spices rise in vapor, part of them escape by the vents to perfume the oven, the stove, the room, the house, and even the road beside it, but some of that fragrance will remain in the pie itself.

"At last she opens the door at exactly

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the appointed hour. There sits the pie. It is turned to gold, and it is marked with crimson, for the juice of the berries has boiled and risen in steam and raged and burst upward through the vents, and here it has issued in a forceful little stream that has leaked down the side of the pie plate—do you see?—and become burned to a crisp?"

"Oh, dang it!" said I, half bored and half curious.

"But at last," went on The Duster, picking up the pie and beginning to walk back and forth with it, "but at last the work is completed, and the fuming ends, and the priestess bears across the room the cooked pie, with clouds of steam and the aroma of cooked loganberries and spices streaming behind her—like a pagan priestess, Baldy, offering up some mysterious sacrifice——"

"Duster, I'm getting scared," I told him. "Are you clean daffy?"

"Inspired, and so a little crazy," said The Duster. "But see what this girl has done, this tender, innocent, charming, obedient, lovely, graceful, young, timid Marguerite has done? She has taken life; she has gathered it in her hands; she has made out of it a sacrifice to please the other gods, the stern, brutal, cruel, avaricious gods; the men, in other words. And to one of them she has finally sent the sacrifice and now he holds it in his hands——".

"Duster," said I, "she sent you one of six pies that she just made out of canned berries, and she sent it because her dad wanted her to!"

"Is that so?" replied The Duster. "However, who can tell what was in her mind when she sent it, and gave it into the hands of the honest, true, valiant, and faithful Baldy Wye?"

"Well, let's have a piece," said I.

"You can eat it," answered The Duster, "because I'm not able to. Loganberries always give me indigestion."

It wasn't until later in the day that I was able to see that he had broken out into the tirade all because he wanted to cover up the effect of what I had said about about his turning the children against their father.

Right then I should have left The Duster. But how could I? The ten dollars a day, I would like to say, were not in my mind. As a matter of fact, they were, because this was the easiest and the best paid job that I ever had had. However, more than the money I was interested in the show and in wondering what that fellow would do next.

Nothing happened for two or three days, except visits from Tommy Lamont, now and then.

It was only two days after the first lesson that Tommy came crashing into the house and yelled out to me—because The Duster wasn't there—that that day he and his brother, the natural shot, had been shooting at a mark, and that he had beaten Bill all hollow.

It was a great day for Tommy. He was so full of it that he had to talk, and he told me that it was as though The Duster had been there beside him, quieting him, helping to steady the barrel of the gun. Every time he thought of The Duster, he knew that he would win, and he did. He shot the very heart out of the target, and out of Bill also, it seemed. For the latter was so furiously jealous that he could not believe his eyes. Bill, up to that point, had been one half a degree bigger, tougher, stronger, more capable than Tommy, but The Duster had turned the scale in favor of the rider. To settle the matter, Bill had started a fight, of which they had had at least a thousand in the preceding years, with Bill always the victor, except for that time when Tommy dropped a pumpkin on him from the second story window.

But on this day, when Billy led with a smashing right, Tom ducked just as The Duster showed him how to do, and, half blindly, smote up and over.

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He was aware of the flash of his own fist darting like a swallow home over the shoulder of his brother, and then the punch whanged on Bill's jaw and sat him down with a thump. He got up again, bewildered and furious. But again he went down before the same uncanny hook. That had ended the battle.

"The Duster did it! The Duster did it! He could do anything!" said Tommy.

"How about Bill?" I asked. "Will he get over being upset like that?"

"I don't care. Aw, sure he will," said the boy. "Why shouldn't he? He licked me a thousand times. Why shouldn't I lick him, once?"

Well, that was easily answered, but there was no good in answering it to that youngster. He was too sure of what was right and wrong—and all that was right was The Duster.

I put in a good deal about this scene, so that you can see how close the boy felt himself to Thurlow, and then you can understand better the meaning of what happened a couple of nights later when it had turned so chilly with a wind off the snows that we closed the door.

A tap came at that door and when I opened it, in stepped Tommy Lamont. He had a bundle over his shoulder and a rifle in his hand.

"Hullo, Tommy," said I, "been hunting?"

"No," said he, "I'm just starting."

"For what?" said I.

"A job," said Tommy.

He looked across at The Duster as steady as could be:

"You'll hear from others, so I came to tell you the straight of it, sir. My father heard that I'd been coming over here, and he forbade me to ever come near you again. I told him he didn't have a right to keep me away from—from—you!"

He was on fire as he said this.

"So I came to say good-by, Mr. Thurlow!"

The Duster looked down to the floor and I couldn't tell whether he were in thought or simply covering a smile. If it was the second thing, he ought to burn in fire for ten million years.

At last he said: "Tommy, I'm sorry that you have had this trouble with your father, but I'm going to ask you to do something for me."

"Go out and rough it and do some hunting or whatever you please for two days, and then come back to me, will you?"

"Yes, sir," says the boy. "I'll do whatever you say."

"Good night, then," says The Duster, "before your father catches up with you!"

The youngster flashed a smile at him, waved a hand at me, and ducked out through the door.

Fourteen, and in the hands of The Duster! It made my head swim.

CHAPTER XII.

THE HOLDUP.

THE next day at about noon we got the news of the holdup of the Emmet stage.

We saw the news, you might better say, because we were both down in the plaza, as the Christmasites called the little central square of the town, when the stage came rumbling in.

It had picked up half a dozen riders along the road and they swept along in a vanguard, knocking up a lot of dust, and doing no good, and making a lot of noise; but all feeling pretty important, because they had got in on the main picture and could share in the excitement.

Tom Logan was one of those riders, and when he pulled up pretty close to me, I asked him what it was all about.

He pretended to be perfectly cool and pretty much bored with everything,

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which is the way that your true Westerner likes to seem when there is action in the air. But Tom couldn't fool me. I could see the cigarette paper twitch in his fingers as he made a clumsy smoke.

"Nothing wrong," said Tom. "Only the stage has just been stuck up, 'Lefty' Gainor is killed, and fifteen thousand dollars stole. Outside of that, everything's just as per usual."

The people were piling out of the coach now. The driver was down off his seat, and giving orders and directions and advice in a very important way, and the job that he superintended was the carrying of Gainor out of the coach.

Lefty was a guard, on that run, and for six or seven years he had sat on the driver's box with a riot gun at his hand. He had fired that riot gun, too. Three times, and no less, people had tried to stop the stage, and three times the riot gun of Lefty Gainor reached them and knocked the ambition right out of their hides! "Brick" Harper was one of those would-be robbers, and Brick had been left dead on the road's edge, with a shocking lot of lead in his face and his brain. After that, there was no more trouble along that run, because the crooks felt that Lefty was bad business to interfere with. He was, too!

I was sorry to hear that he was killed, and as a matter of fact he was not. He had a bullet through the body, though, and the people that carried him didn't say a word. They didn't tell him to buck up, or that this would turn out all right, and they didn't say any other of the fool things that we usually do say in such times. All they did was to step slowly and softly, and give each other directions with looks and nods.

By that I knew that Lefty wasn't dead, but badly done for, and half an hour later the doctor sent out word that Gainor might die in ten minutes, or might live out a natural life. It was a gamble. The doctor didn't know on which side to bet, but he inclined toward a quick death.

That was enough for us. When a doctor in a small town gives up as much hope as that, the thing looks finished.

We had the details of the crime, by this time.

It seems that the stage had just crossed from the Emmet onto the south fork road. It was over the first bridge on the Christmas run, and just as Chris Porter, the driver, slammed the brakes off with a jangle and sent his whiplash singing over the backs of his horses, a small man stepped out from the bushes on the right-hand side of the road and leveled a rifle at Chris and Gainor. He called out in a sort of muffled, deep bass voice for them to stop the coach and throw up their hands.

They did neither.

Gainor jerked up the barrel of his riot gun for a snap shot, and Porter urged the horses ahead. But as he shouted to the team, he heard the shotgun roar and the rifle clang, and poor Gainor slid out of his place and onto the footboard of the driver's seat.

That discouraged Porter a good deal. As he explained afterward, it would have been all right if his hands hadn't been filled with whip and reins. As it was, he simply had to jam the brakes on and stop the coach with a jar.

There were four men and two women inside of that coach, and men with women to watch them perform usually make a pretty good fighting lot. However, for some seconds the men inside had been listening to the groaning of Gainor and seeing red drip down. So when the robber ordered the lot of them to step out of the coach they certainly stepped in order.

They had a good look at the bandit. He was small, and he had over his

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head a piece of red cloth with big eye-holes cut in it. It was the right kind of a mask to keep a man from being identified, because it covered his whole head, hair and all, right down to the chest. There was only one thing, in addition to his height, that would help to spot him.

He was about five feet three inches tall, and looked pretty slight. Also, his voice, which was very deep, was husky and thick, as if he had a cold.

His hands were small, too, and very brown. But that didn't mean much, because most hands are brown in the West.

He was businesslike and cool as you please. He told the two women to look after Gainor's wound, and if they hadn't known something about first aid, Gainor would have bled to death in ten minutes. After that, he went down the line of passengers and fanned them for watches and wallets, and finally he had the pay box of the Christmas Lumbering and Development Co. tumbled out and told the stage to drive on at once.

It was a pretty good haul. There were twelve thousand dollars in the box, and the wallets, watches, and the rest of the loot totaled up about three thousand more. Porter drove the stage ahead, and they made good time into Christmas, you can bet, with poor Gainor groaning at every bump.

No matter how good an impression The Duster had made since he came to the town, and no matter how his description differed from that of the bandit, I must say that a lot of eyes looked pretty glumly at him after this robbery. But he had an alibi as big as a mountain, for plenty of people had seen him right in the main street of Christmas at the moment when the robbery was taking place.

He went on home, while I waited downtown to hear what had happened to Lefty. A crowd of a hundred people watched the little bulletins that were put out in front of the Gregory General Merchandise store, where Lefty had been bedded down in a back room, and where they didn't dare to move him for a while.

Half an hour after the examination, it was announced that Lefty was sure to die, and ten minutes later, somebody came out and said he still had a chance, and would every one keep quiet.

It was like watching a horse race. I never was at a more exciting thing than that.

A little after that, a sheet of paper was tacked up on the door of the store. It said that Lefty was now doing pretty well, sleeping under the influence of a narcotic, and people were requested to use back streets and alleys the rest of that day so that Lefty might have some peace. It was a sight to see the boots and shoes tiptoeing by that bulletin and every man reading the words for himself—if he knew how to read. Then the crowd stood about in little groups, talking about the good character of Lefty—a thing they never had discovered before—and how a big posse ought to be organized to comb the country for the crook.

Then Jim Gregory, a white man if ever there was one, came out and announced in a low voice that the store would be closed that day, and each day thereafter until Lefty was pronounced out of danger. Every one nodded and smiled at Jim and swore that the store wouldn't lose any trade by this self-sacrifice. But I never noticed that good deeds pulled in trade as much as the price marks that show in a store window.

In the meantime, the posse was organized, and I was asked to join. But I could not see things that way. I had served on three posses before. I was with the gang that cornered the Finch brothers, and "Digger" Smith, down in the Pecos, and I've had a scar

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and a lame hip ever since. It was Digger who potted me while I was trying to be a brave hero and make a name for myself.

Now that poor Lefty seemed in better shape, I went home to bring the news to The Duster, and I was surprised by the interest that he showed. He wanted to know every detail of the reports, and he nodded, and walked up and down the room a good deal while he listened. In two minutes, I know that The Duster did have something to do with that robbery, and that his share in it didn't please him a lot. However, I wasn't prepared for what was to come just after this.

I remember that I had raked together a lunch, and we were sitting down late to pone, and cold baked ham, and canned tomatoes, and plenty of coffee, when I heard the clicking of a trotting horse in the street, and looked out the door in time to see Marguerite Lamont dismount.

She came up to the door almost at a run, and when I called to her to come in, and mentioned her name, The Duster jerked his head a little, and took on the look of a wolf that has been bitten to the bone.

He got up slowly, and took about half a minute turning around to her, though it was he she had come to see, and not me at all, as you might surmise.

She busted out:

"They've gone out—thirty armed men, and they're hunting for him, Mr. Thurlow!"

"For whom? The robber?" said The Duster pretty blandly. "Is he a friend of yours?"

"Why, he's poor little Tommy, of course!" says she.

Whang! What a jolt that was to me! The Duster acted pretty surprised, too, but somehow I could tell that he wasn't. He had guessed already, and that was why he had been so worried about the robbery, and the condition of Lefty Gainor.

"Tommy? Tommy? Little Tommy, your brother?" says The Duster.

"When they talked about his size, and then about his big, husky voice, then I knew. Oh, Mr. Thurlow, he's always wanted to be a man, and he's played at grown man so often, with just that voice. I knew at once, and Billy guessed, too. And my father is sure, and is half mad!"

"Did he send you?" asked The Duster, with an odd little ring in his voice.

"He knew that I was coming here," said the girl.

She went up close to The Duster, with her hands clasped at her breast.

"We'll work all our lives, to pay back the money. And Mr. Gainor will live, if praying can save him; but save Tommy, poor Tommy, dear little Tommy! No one but you can find him and bring him home!"

CHAPTER XIII.

GOOD ACTING.

THE DUSTER took the girl back to her horse and helped her into the saddle, and then I saw him take one of her hands in both of his, and look straight up into her face with those gleaming eyes of his.

He said: "I'll never rest, day or night, until I've found Tommy and brought him back to you, Marguerite."

Actor? Why, he was one of the best. The way that he said her name would have parted thunder clouds and brought the sun right slam through. She smiled back at him, and tried to thank him, but she was choked, and crying; and The Duster stepped back and let her ride away with the mottlings of shadow and sunlight sweeping over her.

For my part, when I thought of how he had trained the boy to shoot and

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had talked up the wild life to him a lot more than I had heard, no doubt, of course it made me despise him pretty much, and I was on the verge of leaving him and the job altogether. Then there was a good deal of sham in his talk to the girl, and sentimentality in the air. Still, I felt sure that he did mean part of what he said. He meant it at least enough to be certain that he would do as he promised: stay with the work until he had brought in Tom Lamont. That was a good deal—that was the important point.

When he came back into the house, he took a piece of paper and began to sketch on it, asking me about distances from point to point, and for two whole hours he went ahead making and correcting a map of all the district around Christmas.

I knew that this had something to do with his hunt for the boy, though I wondered why he would waste so much time. However, even when he had finished his map, he kept on figuring over it, back and forth, until I said:

"Are you going to wait until to-morrow night for him to come back to you?"

"He hasn't a chance of keeping away from them till to-morrow night," said The Duster. "I've got to go out and find him. Will you come along?"

I was surprised that he wanted me—a man as smart as The Duster on the trail.

"I'll go along," said I, "but I'm not wearing a gun!"

The Duster merely smiled.

"We're not going to cut our way through, or shoot our way out," said he.

Under those terms we started, just after the full heat of the afternoon was ended. I rode Dolly, of course, and he took the other bay, and he headed straight away toward the upper valley of the Christmas River, where the marshes stretched more than a mile across.

"He'd have to ride by full daylight up the valley to get there," I pointed out to The Duster.

"Kids always take the longest chance, if they are left to their own wits," said he.

He seemed so sure that I didn't argue, and we jogged the slopes and cantered the levels, until we were on the outer border of the marsh.

There The Duster began to cut for sign. I found a set of hoofprints myself, but a quarter of a mile inside the woods, I found the horse itself, and it was a wild two-year-old with a shaggy coat and no saddle marks. I came back and saw The Duster sitting his horse in the shadow of a group of poplars and making a cigarette. He was blowing out smoke and watching the rising wind snatch at it when I came up to him.

"Why did you give him two days for rambling before he returned to you?" I asked him.

"I underestimated him," said The Duster frankly. "I knew there was mischief in him when he said good-by to me the other night, and I almost called him back and gave him a lecture, but then I remembered that he was only fourteen and I thought that camping out alone would be enough excitement for him."

"You used to sing a song to him," I pointed out, "about Billy the Kid, killing a man when he was twelve."

He looked keenly aside at me, but did not answer this remark, and I had a pleasant and rather scared feeling that I had cut even The Duster pretty deep.

"We'll never find anything by this light," I said—for it was sundown, and the West all golden fire.

"I've found the trail already," said he.

"The dickens you have!" I gasped at him. "How do you know?"

"Because it goes straight into the woods and dives through deep water,

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like a man who wanted to get into the shadows as quickly as he could."

"Then why are you waiting?"

"Until he's sure that we can't follow him very easily. If we come up on him by surprise, all right. If not, he's apt to drill us. He knows how to shoot!"

He said that last with a grim touch of satisfaction which I admired. And there he sat and finished his cigarette, while the sun dropped lower and the sky turned from gold to red. A blue-jay flew out of the woods and flashed over our heads.

"That means mischief," said The Duster thoughtfully.

I stared at his serious, raised face. I wouldn't have thought that The Duster, of all the men in the world, had the least touch of superstition in him, but then you never can tell about the fighters. Men who have taken their lives in their hands many times begin to get some funny ideas.

Then he led the way into the woods.

I could see the trail clearly, as it cut into the soft soil, and we worked along gradually. The Duster went first. I was willing to try that place of danger myself, but I must say that he was generous and forced me to keep behind him.

The instant that we were well into the willows, the air was ten shades darker than it had been outside, but still we could see fairly well by the reflected, rosy light from the sky; the only trouble was that it already was pretty hard to tell solid scum from solid soil, but we kept on at a steady pace.

Finally the trail turned to the right and seemed to be following a ridge of good honest ground.

The Duster stopped there and tethered his horse. I did the same without being told, and we went on again, with The Duster still leading. I knew he thought that he was close to the quarry, by the way in which he paused, now and then. And the light was so very dim that he was continually on his hands and knees, examining, and even using his fingers to touch the sign.

We went through a stretch of naked stumps and into bigger trees again, when The Duster stopped me by raising his hand. It was almost as though he wanted me to listen to the chorus of the frogs, or enjoy the perfume of the steaming marsh water, which seemed to grow thicker and mistier in the first cool of the night.

Then a horse snorted in the thicket, and the last half of that snort was stifled, as though a hand had grabbed the pony by the nostrils.

It was a jumpy moment. If The Duster was right, that horse belonged to young Tom Lamont, and no matter how young he might be, he had proved that he knew how to shoot to kill. However, The Duster did not hesitate. He went straight into that thicket like a snake into long grass, I admired him a good deal for it. The most I could do was to get up my nerve to follow in his steps, right behind him.

I don't think that he made so much as a whisper on his way through the brush, but I'm equally sure that I did.

However, presently I saw the gloom of the thick foliage thin out, and then I heard The Duster's voice saying suddenly:

"Here are friends for you, Tommy."

Right with the last word, a gun exploded, and a voice cried out.

"Tommy!" I shouted, too sick to be afraid any more. "What have you done?"

And I rushed straight out into a little clearing.

I could see Tommy standing at the side and the long gleam of the rifle he had used.

"I don't know! I don't know!" said he. "Did I hit you, Mr. Wye?"

"You've killed The Duster," said I.

"The Duster! The Duster!" says

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Tommy, dropping the rifle, and in a voice I don't want to hear again.

But at that, The Duster himself stepped out of the brush into the clearing, saying in a cool, daylight tone: "That was a good snapshot, Tommy, but never drop your gun till you've seen the whites of the bear's dead eyes."

"You're not touched?" says Tommy, running toward him. "I didn't hit you, sir?"

"Not a bit. Still, it was a good quick shot."

"I thought I'd killed you!" said Tommy. "I thought—I thought——"

His voice stopped. There was a queer sound—rather a pulse than a sound—and I knew that poor little Tommy was sobbing, and shutting his teeth and his lips over that sign of feminine weakness.

The Duster was really wonderful, then.

He kept right on talking, quite loudly and cheerfully, and remarked that we'd better be getting out of there, because night air in marshes made sure fever. He picked up the fallen rifle, too.

Then Tommy got his breath and gasped:

"What about Lefty?"

"He's sleeping, and going to get well."

"Oh, thank God!" says the boy. "I didn't dream—I mean, you know what you said, about a steady hand and a steady gun, and a deep voice paralyzing people like the look of a snake paralyzes birds—and somehow I never dreamed—and it was only a joke—and then he fired. I saw his gun move, and somehow the rifle suddenly went off—then I put the rest of it through because I thought: I've killed a man, and I might as well do all the rest. I went through it like a dream. And—oh, Mr. Thurlow, are they gunna put me in prison for the rest of my life?"

He had got to The Duster, then, and was hanging onto him, and I heard The Duster say in voice so very gentle and low that I could hardly make it out:

"Look here, Tommy, why do you think that I'm here?"

"To help me, sir, I hope."

"I'm here to help you, Tommy. And I'm going to put all of this right. You're going to be gotten out clean. You have the loot?"

"Yes."

"We'll return it all. Give it to me."

That was like a tap on the shoulder to me. I said to myself: "He's done all this for the sake of stealing the stolen money!"

CHAPTER XIV.

AWAY!

WE did not waste much time in the marsh, for the good reason that the longer we remained there, the more apt were the searchers to come on our traces. We got back to our horses and took the boy with us straight along the back trail on the same line which he had used in getting into the marsh. This was easier than hunting for another way, because the tracks of three horses marked this course even in the dull twilight, to which the day had come; but it would have been very hard even for a Duster to find another way out of the problem.

On the way we learned why the youngster had gone into the marsh. Once he had finished the robbery, he knew that the safest thing for him to do was to run for it as fast as he could leg it into the higher hill, and there live quietly for a couple of months, then gradually, with a different horse, drift away north or south and try to get across the border. But he remembered his promise to come back to The Duster at the end of the second day, and so he determined to hide somewhere near to Christmas. And all of this, it appeared, had been worked out by The Duster, which was the reason that he

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had headed straight for the marsh, after examining his own map of the lay of the land.

It was nearly dark when we came to the edge of the marsh again, but the outer trees loomed up a little blacker and starker against a faint rim of light on the western horizon, and it was by that light that we saw the danger ahead of us. Just as we reached the verge of the marsh, we saw a light flickering in an uncertain way over the ground ahead of us, and, a moment later, we could make out half a dozen riders following a man who went on foot, unhooding a dark lantern to read the sign.

I heard The Duster laugh softly.

"A bullet through that lantern would be like stealing the one eye of the three witches," said he. "But they're already close enough to the marsh to guess what's in here."

If they went into the marsh itself, we could easily give them the slip, so we drew off a little distance to the right, and stopped there, when they were so close that we were afraid they might hear the noise of the horses splashing in the water of the marsh.

Of course our hope was that they would follow the sign straight into the trees, and then we could slide back down the valley toward Christmas. But when they came close to the woods they stopped. They were near enough for us to hear their voices in the moments when the wind allowed. It was blowing a gale, but only in puffs, and in one of the intermissions, I heard one of the posse say that if they ventured in they probably could get "the skunk."

The voice of Sheriff Renney himself answered: "I wouldn't care to come at him in the dark, like that. We'll wait for the daylight."

"You ain't afraid, Renney?" said the other.

He must have been a fool, asking that question of Renney, but the sheriff answered up very well. He said: "I'm always afraid when I come within gunshot of a crook. Besides, I shouldn't be surprised if The Duster himself is in there!"

"Good gosh!" exclaimed the other, all his courage snatched away from him at once. "The Duster?"

"Exactly," says Renney. "I don't know, but I feel in my bones that The Duster had a hand in it."

"It couldn't have been The Duster himself. He was seen in Christmas at that time."

"It might have been a companion or a pupil," said the sheriff. "He's lost his old partner, and he ain't a man to do all the dirty work without help. Maybe he's trainin' up somebody to take the place of Manness?"

I heard a gulped breath, and saw the head of the boy turn toward The Duster. He himself was not stirred by the words of the sheriff, but merely stuck out his chin a little more, as it seemed to me. The talking had not ended, and you can imagine that we were pretty near sick with excitement.

"Maybe he is," agreed another man in the posse. "But what makes you so sure that The Duster had a hand in this job?"

"Because it's the kind of thing that The Duster always does. Most great crooks do old crimes in new ways. But he uses the old ways and makes them new by salting 'em down with nerve. He's got the coolest nerve that ever held a gun, and this gent that stuck up the Emmet stage certainly used The Duster idea. There was six armed men in that stage, and only one robber takes on the job, steps out into the road, drops hard-boiled Lefty Gainor, and strings the rest of 'em out of the stage."

"It does sound like The Duster!" said some one. "And think that I shook hands with him myself, this morning."

"You won't die of leprosy account of that," said the sheriff, very dry. "But

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this job either was done by a fellow coached by The Duster, and tryin' out his nerve, or else it was done by some dang young fool that never realized an instant the chances that he was takin'."

You can lay your money that I was beginning to respect that Renney more than I ever had before.

"Shall we go on in?" asks another.

"We'll stay out here," said Renney firmly.

"Man, by morning they'll be a hundred miles away!"

"I don't think they will. I telegraphed to Emmet before I started for the marsh. They'll send down enough men to ring the other side of the marsh, and I'll have twenty more men in a few minutes to guard this section. Get a fire together, some of you boys, will you? And make it a big one. I want to send a signal back to Christmas."

Straightway they began to gather brush for a fire and soon had a huge heap of it together.

"Suppose that the crook or crooks see the flame?" some one asked Renney.

"He's apt to crawl out toward the edge of the marsh and see the cause of the fire," said the sheriff, "and when he does that, he's pretty sure to turn around and try to break off on the far side of the willows. That will run him into the arms of the Emmet men."

"So that they'll get the credit?"

"We're not here riding for glory," said Renney. "We're trying to keep the law strong and clean."

I never had heard the law spoken of like that, before, and it gave me a new idea. But when I heard Renney speak, it suddenly was pretty clear to me that there was another angle on the law, and that Renney must be right. You can tell truth when you hear it, almost like a light.

In the meantime, I was getting more and more scared. A good man to have on the side of the law, that fellow Renney. But mighty bad when he was chasing you. That was the way that I felt, at least.

While the men were gathering the rest of the brushwood for the fire, The Duster spoke out to us quietly:

"That man Renney has grown a new set of brains. He's worked so long on Manness and me that he's grown intelligent."

He said it coldly, without any emotion, but in spite of the fact that Renney had numbers and position against us, I all at once felt sorry for him and would not have bet on his life for any odds you could offer. I think that Tommy felt rather a chill, listening to The Duster, also. For all the time he never turned his head away from his teacher whose lesson had produced all this excitement.

"What are we going to do?" I asked The Duster. "Go back into the marsh and try the other side?"

"And run into those Emmet men the sheriff has just been talking about?" answered The Duster. "I think not."

"Then what?" I insisted, because I was beginning to feel weak.

"Maybe we can see a way out by the firelight," was all he would answer.

He got off his horse then, and kneeled in the mud, and seemed to be staring at the sky line that ran rippling over the hills toward Christmas and down into the flat of the valley.

"There are two lumps of horsemen rolling in, already," said The Duster. "One up the valley, and another straight down from Christmas."

He got back just as the match was set to the pile of brush. It set up a smoldering, softly crackling flame for a time, until it had generated enough heat to make the small green twigs explode in fire. Then waves of flame washed up into the air with a great crackling and snapping and hissing of sap.

"We'll ride out now," said The Duster.

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"We'll do what?" I cried at him, for the noise of the fire covered our voices.

"We'll try to lose ourselves in an excess of light," said he. "They'll spend half a minute admiring the greatness of their work."

Then I looked closely at them and saw, as a matter of fact, that every man of the six was turned toward the fire, shading his eyes against it, and looking up to see the height to which the heads of the flame were tossing.

The Duster, in the meantime, without stopping to argue with us, rode straight out from the marsh and into the open, where the light of that fire swept us—like bullets, I could almost say.

The boy followed his leader blindly, and I could not stay behind to be picked up in the sheriff's net, so I sent Dolly out into the open with about as good a will as I would have had in throwing myself over a precipice.

Even now, I can't believe that The Duster had the nerve to try this scheme. It was madness. Then suddenly I remembered what Renney had said about The Duster using old ways with a new courage.

He did not even trot his horse, but walked it straight out into that sea of light. And I could not help remembering with a selfish satisfaction that all the loot was lodged in the saddlebags of The Duster.

Every step that we took I could feel the bullets searching my flesh. The light went through me.

It seemed to me that I never had seen horses walk so slowly. They lifted up their feet as if they were walking in mud, and appeared to be resting between steps.

But we got on. The light grew more dim. I could look back, after a time—I mean, I gathered enough courage for that rearward glance, and the posse had scattered back from the fire, here and there. I felt sure that one or two of them were looking straight toward us, and waited for the alarm cry and the shot. But I suppose that they were blinded, as The Duster had said, by excess of light.

For presently we were trotting smoothly away, and not a soul followed!

CHAPTER XV.

THE HORSE COMES TO DRINK.

HE got back to the Ridley house. Approaching it from the barn, after we had put up our horses, was one of the hardest things that I ever did—for after what the sheriff had said on the verge of the marsh, I would not have been surprised if the dark of that house had blossomed with gunfire.

However, we got safely inside the door.

I grabbed the arm of The Duster.

"Duster," said I, "for Heaven's sake put that money and stuff away! Bury it!"

He merely laughed a little.

"This belongs to Tommy, not to me," said he.

"I don't want it!" says Tommy, gasping with emotion. "I won't have it, Duster. I want you to take it and do whatever you wish with it."

"Tut, tut," says The Duster, and lights a lamp.

On the wall of the room he hung up the saddlebags that had the loot in them. They looked to me like dynamite that might explode any minute and send us all to kingdom come.

The Duster began to talk to the boy.

"What's before you, Tommy?" said he.

"I don't know," said Tommy, who still looked white and sick and had to keep moistening his lips before he spoke.

"And what do you think?"

"If you don't mind, sir, I wish that you would think for me, just now!"

The Duster stopped and clasped his

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hands behind him, and looked up at the ceiling with a frown.

"That's a duty one friend has to another," says he.

I could have snarled out loud, as I listened to the hypocrite and watched his pose.

But it went down with the boy. I could see him swallow the bunk like good food. He blessed The Duster with his eyes.

"Will you do exactly what I tell you?" said The Duster.

"Yes, sir—even if it's to jump off a cliff!"

"It's not that, but I want your solemn promise."

"You have it, sir."

"Then go home to your father."

Tommy rose out of his chair as if a big, hard hand had him by the nape of the neck.

"Yes, sir," was all he said.

But still I did not hope. I wouldn't trust The Duster around the corner—not for a single second.

"You'll go straight home," went on The Duster, "and you'll go in and wake your father up."

"Yes, sir," said the boy, his voice very small and weak.

"And you'll beg him to take you back."

"I'd rather die!" said Tommy. "And it would be denying you, sir."

"I have your promise?" says The Duster, cold as iron.

Tommy choked and then nodded.

"Start brushing that dry mud and slime off your clothes and your boots."

Tommy obeyed. His lip was trembling, and he was green with anticipated humiliation.

"When you wake up your father, wake up your sister, too, and your brother."

Tommy leaned back against the wall, his eyes half closed.

"Bill, too?" says he, in a dying voice.

"Line them up," said The Duster, "and tell them word for word what you did and why you did it."

"To throw blame on you? I never would do that!"

"You'll do what I tell you. Tell everything that you had in your mind—about guns, and shooting, and perhaps there was a little remembering about Billy the Kid?"

Tom's face grew very hot and red, but the touch of shame seemed to give him more strength to stand up to the hard things before him.

"When you've told your story from the beginning to the end, I want you to beg your father to forgive you and take you back home, because you've decided that you want to be a good boy, and hope that he will start running your life again."

The thought of this made the boy bite his lip.

"Then," said The Duster, "I want you to turn to your sister and ask her to forgive you and promise——"

"Dear old Margie," said Tommy, with tears in his eyes, "it won't need any asking of her!"

At this, The Duster made a strange pause, and looked straight at the boy, as though he were seeing a ghost. Finally he recovered himself with a small sigh.

"After that," he continued, "you'll turn to your brother Bill and you'll tell him that you realize that you've brought shame on the family and a smudge upon his name, and you hope that he'll forgive you, too!"

"I'll punch his nose if he doesn't," said the boy.

"Remember!" said The Duster, and lifted a lean forefinger.

Tommy sighed, and nodded.

"I'll do everything you say," said he.

"After you've finished," said The Duster, "you'll say good-by to them all, and beg them to remember you, and start for the door, telling them that you're going to give yourself up to the

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law and confess everything that you've done, as the son of a minister ought to do."

"Jail!" gasped Tommy. "Jail for life, sir!"

"Not a bit! Gainor's alive. They wouldn't give you more than five or six years in a reform school. And I'd manage to see you all the time, Tommy. Remember. You've had your fling. You've nearly taken a man's life. And now you have to pay for it."

The eyes of Tommy rolled upward, as a doubt, I suppose, appeared for the first time in his mind. But finally he took a big breath—big enough for a man—and nodded, and gasped out: "I'll do that. I'll—I'll go and wake the judge up and tell him everything!"

"Good!" said The Duster. "That's the way I like to hear you talk."

"They'll want the money, sir?" says the youngster faintly.

"They'll find it here with me. Suppose you carried that money to them, and you were robbed on the way? They'd think you had hidden it!"

Tommy shuddered at the mere thought.

"I'll do everything that you say, sir," said he. His eyes brightened. "You're right, I need to be punished. I won't be a baby about it, either."

He went to The Duster and took one hand in both of his and looked up to him with worship, as nobody, man, or child, or woman, ever looked at me, or ever looked at you, either, most likely.

Then, not finding any right words to say, he gets out of the house and we hear him running down the path.

When we were alone I gave The Duster the first blast by saying: "So you're turning him over to the law, Duster? You're gunna ruin the rest of his life for him, are you?"

The Duster merely laughed at me.

"Baldy," he told me, "you make me feel like an old, old man. I want to say 'my child' and pat you on the head when I speak to you. It's plain that you don't understand anything that I've done in this little affair."

"I don't understand, except that you've turned that fine kid into a jail bird."

"Nonsense!" said The Duster, laughing again. "Rub your eyes and wake up, will you?"

I blinked at him. Then suddenly I realized that I was a fool to try to follow the turns and the twists of such a brain as his. Already he had done things that night which I never would have dreamed of. And recently I'd seen him doing a pretty fair man-sized miracle in the way that he had changed the opinion of the town of Christmas. When he came there, he had the name of a regular wolf, a killer. But now he was about the best liked man in the town, by a lot of the people, and he was winning respect on all sides. He had excited every one by this great game of his about 'going straight.'

So I said no more, and The Duster began to walk with a quick, light stride up and down the room, sometimes pausing and laughing a little to himself, and sometimes clapping me on the shoulder as he went by, as though inviting me to enjoy the joke which I didn't understand.

I never saw him so happy, or so excited.

"Let me tell you the finest thing in the world," said he, "and that's to bring a horse to the water and to make him drink."

"What do you mean?" said I.

"You'll see in a few minutes," said The Duster. "Recantation, recantation is what I'm after!"

He laughed again, with that purr in his laughter which I had heard there before and which usually gave me a nightmare the night after. I looked at him as at a strange sort of a monster. I never saw such mind power, if you follow my drift, in any man. It fright-

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ened me a good deal, but also I could not take my eyes or my ears from him. He was always a few jumps ahead of me, and that made it all the more interesting. Besides, I'd grown to like him.

No matter how he was to others, he was always fair and friendly with me, and gave me a good chance, and never sneered at me, no matter how often he might laugh. I knew that he would make the hardest enemy in the world, and I also guessed that he might make one of the best friends.

In the midst of his pacing he stopped short, listened a moment, and then scooped up a paper and sat down. I saw that he was only pretending to read, and really fighting back a smile all the time, but I didn't guess why until I heard footsteps coming down the path—with his cat's ears he must have spotted them long before me—and then into the doorway came glimmering two figures, and dissolved in the lamp light into—who do you think?

Why, you've guessed it before me, I suppose.

It was the minister, and Tommy, his son!

CHAPTER XVI.

THE END OF THE TRAIL.

OLD Lamont looked tired and worn; Tommy looked as grim and hard as iron. And The Duster went to them as smooth and affable as you please. He could have a slick, kind manner when he liked. He said he was glad to see them; he wanted them to sit down.

"I won't sit down, Thurlow," said the minister, overlooking the hand which The Duster held out to him. "But I've come to ask you for help."

"Help?" said The Duster, and I could see he was pretending a lot of surprise which he didn't feel. "Help, Mr. Lamont? I don't believe that you would come to me for help!"

Rage, weakness, and defeat came up in the face of the good minister. I was mighty sorry for him. There never was a better, simpler, truer, more honest man in the world than Lamont, in spite of his hot temper. But he was helpless, with such a man as The Duster to handle him.

"I've come on account of Tommy," said Lamont slowly, and then looked at me.

"I'll leave," said I.

"No," said Lamont slowly. "You know everything already. And it helps me to have you here, Baldy. You're an honest man!"

He said that bitterly, and then went on: "I've had the whole story from Tommy. How you took him in and were—a friend to him. And then how this — robbery — and shooting — took place! And how you got him out of the marsh."

He paused, and involuntarily admiration showed in his eyes.

Then he continued: "Finally he has come to us and spoken exactly as you told him to speak. In the end, about punishment for his crime!"

The teeth of old Lamont clicked. I almost thought he would throw himself at The Duster. But of course he didn't. People always manage to control their tempers when they're with tigers that are outside of a cage.

"In that," went on Lamont, "I see a great deal of justice. He should be punished! But when I consider that he will be marred and smudged with guilt all the rest of his days, I wonder if the punishment is not too hard for a child of fourteen? A child, Thurlow!"

He had to stop a little to control himself, which he did very well, going on: "A boy who never has given me one real moment of worry—until, shortly after—you came to Christmas!"

"Are you blaming him?" cried out Tommy in a loud voice.

His father looked down at him and sighed.

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"I'm not blaming him," he said. "Not altogether. But now, Thurlow, my boy tells me that he insists on giving himself up to the law—which is throwing his life away. He must do it, because you told him to!"

"No, no," said Tommy bravely, "but because he showed me it was the right thing to do."

"Thurlow," said Lamont, "you have more power over my own son than I have. I've brought him here to beg you to try to change his mind!"

The Duster made a long pause, and in that pause he looked straight into the face of Lamont, and Lamont met that glance for a moment, but finally dropped his eyes and his head also. It was rather like a nod of assent.

Then The Duster spoke at last, saying: "Tom won't need any convincing. He's simply forgotten that of course a boy's first duty is to obey his father!"

We all looked at Tommy, but he looked only at The Duster with the widest pair of eyes you ever saw, as he swallowed that idea, and saw an escape from that horrible ordeal of the prison.

"And as for punishment," went on The Duster, "if Tom went back to you and confessed and put his pride in his pocket, I suppose that he did about as well as any man could ask. That might be called punishment enough, for a lad of Tom's pride. Do you agree, Lamont?"

"I do," says Lamont.

"Do you mean it, sir?" says Tommy.

"Of course I do," says The Duster.

Tommy fairly groaned with relief.

"Then I'll do just what you say, father," said he.

"Go home," said Lamont. "I'll see you in the morning when you get up."

Tommy stopped long enough to give The Duster one brilliant smile of love and thanks, and then scooted.

It left the minister and The Duster together, and it hurt me to see the suffering in the face of the good man, and the cruel triumph in the face of the crook.

"Thanks for staying," said The Duster. "I wanted to go back to the first talk we had together by the church. About the grave, you know, for Manness. At that time, it seemed that you didn't have a price, Lamont. You were one of those fellows a lot too proud to let their hands be soiled. Perhaps you've changed a little, since?"

Lamont closed his eyes and endured.

And The Duster went to the wall and took down the two saddlebags. For the first time I saw what he intended doing, and it took my breath.

"The fifteen thousand is in these bags," said he. "And an extra thousand besides, so that poor Lefty Gainor will get something big enough to make him wish to be shot twice a year. Enough, in fact, to keep him drunk for a month, once he gets well!"

He laughed a little as he said this, and went on: "Now, concerning the price of that grave plot for poor Manness—here is what I bid. This sixteen thousand, Lamont. And then the return of your boy to you. And the keeping of him out of jail. And his submission all around to you on every point—except perhaps one!"

His eyes were crueller than ever as he said this. It was plain on what point Lamont would never be able to control Tommy until death put an end to the career of The Duster.

"I'm offering this big price, Lamont, and in exchange you can give me the grave that you refused to Manness. And you can take your pride like a sheep and sacrifice it on the altar of a good deed, eh? That's a good, ministerial thing to do, I'd say!"

I watched Lamont turn toward the door. Then he took two quick steps and I almost thought that he would go straight out.

He turned, however.

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"If I don't take that money to return to the rightful owners—then you keep it for yourself, Thurlow?"

"Exactly—with great enjoyment, old fellow."

The minister went straight up and picked up the treasure, but he looked as though he were lifting rattlesnakes by the rattling tails.

He turned fair toward The Duster.

"You've beaten me, Duster," said he. "You've beaten me fairly and squarely, and on a point where I didn't dream that even angels could make me give way. But you have done it, and I congratulate you. Next Sunday I shall retract in church everything that I said against you. The day following you shall have the grave plot."

He passed a hand across his forehead.

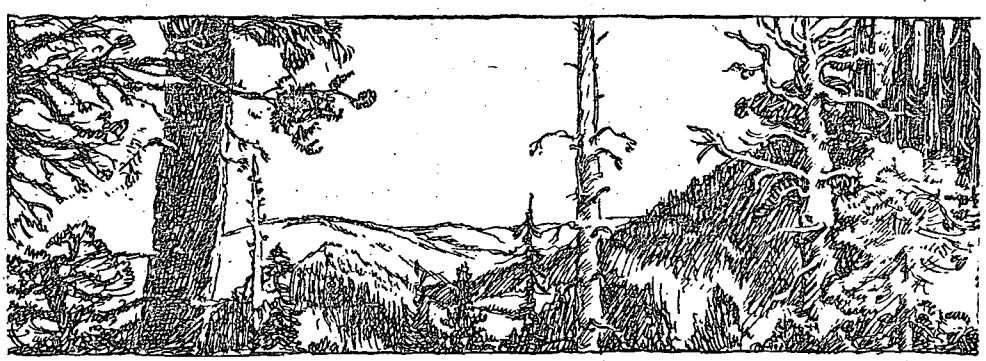
"You struck me through my children, Duster," he said. "But I have been proud and I deserved the blow. I had been proud," said Lamont slowly, again. "May Heaven be merciful to me, a sinner!"

With that, he turned and walked out the door, and with a good, steady step.

But as I watched his square shoulders and his fine gray head, I wondered if the fight were over, or barely beginning.

The end of The Duster's coming to Christmas was achieved, however, and the ashes of Hector Manness were to sleep on the hillside, watching Christmas River forever.

Another story of The Duster will appear in a forthcoming issue of WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE.



A FOREST SCHOOL

SOME twenty-five fortunate young foresters are having the benefits of firsthand study of their subject this year. In the latter part of June was inaugurated the first university school of forestry to be held in the upper Michigan peninsula. The students, third year men at the school of forestry and conservation at the University of Michigan, have the use of one of the lumber camps of the Cleveland-Cliffs Iron Co., some ten miles west of Munising, Alger County. This will permit frequent excursions to and inspection of the wood-working industries of the region, which is located within the Mackinac National Forest.

The project is a practical move toward utilization and reforestation of the cutover lands of the upper peninsula and is fostered by a wise and forward-looking State.

The sessions of the forest school will be under the direction of two professors, and it is planned later to replace the temporary camp by a permanent one. Surely the forest is the ideal summer school.

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Cat's-paw

By George Cory Franklin

Author of "Ridin' Proud," etc.

THERE were two things on this earth that Ken Maynard utterly despised. One was a thief, and the other was a mountain lion. "And the' ain't much difference between 'em," he told the big hound at his feet. "A thief is too lazy to work and get anything for himself, and a lion is too cowardly to tackle anything that'll fight back."

Two days after he had made this remark to the dog Ken's anger and hatred received added fuel. He came across the gulch from his placer to his cabin and found the dog dead, his insides torn out by one long, raking blow from the sharp claw of a mountain lion. Ken went on to his cabin, got his rifle, and back-tracked the dog to the rim rock where the fight had occurred. He had paid fifty dollars to the trader at the Forks for the hound but a short time before, and had expected to make a great hunter of him; and now, before he had been able to teach the dog how to keep the big cats treed until he could finish them with a rifle, the lions had killed him.

Ken sat down on the blood-stained grass at the edge of the cliff and watched the cracks and crevices along the rocky ridge. Toward evening he saw a large female lion creeping stealthily out of a cave not one hundred yards away. He laid the rifle barrel on a rock, saw that the small white bead rested in the clover leaf rear sight, and lined the weapon toward a point just back of the old killer's ear. When the rifle cracked, the lioness dropped with scarcely a kick, and Ken eased himself down the hillside by hanging onto the bushes to remove her pelt.

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"Huh!" ejaculated the miner, "Kittens, eh?" He looked back into the cave, his gun in readiness to fire, but could see nothing. He laid the rifle beside him and slid the point of his keen skinning knife from paw to body on the inside of a front leg, then picked up the next foot. Something touched his hand. He glanced down. The kitten, which had been playing in a bed of spruce needles, had come up behind him on softly cushioned feet and now stood barely six inches high, looking wonderingly at its dead mother, the hair on its neck rising with fear at the terrible combination of smells.

If the kitten had been back in the cave Maynard would have shot it as quickly as he could have sighted his rifle, but the proximity, as well as the actions, of the little animal, made it difficult to kill even one of the despised breed. Ken pushed the kitten away with a strange feeling of self-condemnation and went on with his work. A moment later the kitten came back and, thrusting its nose forward to make a closer examination of the affair, touched Maynard's wrist. Instantly the tiny tongue came out and kissed the red hand that had murdered the baby's mother. Ken wiped the hand guiltily on his overalls.

"You danged little beggar! I ought to throw you over the cliff." Ken was trying to bluff it through, although every moment his purpose was weakening in the presence of the big, solemn eyes which watched him with so much curiosity. He finished his task and rolled the pelt up. The kitten wabbled forward unsteadily, as much as to say: "Well, that's done, what next?" Maynard picked up the baby mountain lion, carrying it and his rifle on one arm, and the heavy pelt of the old one under the other. "I can't leave it here to starve," he argued to himself, apologizing for his weakness.

The little lion was winning its way by sheer weight of its own infantile characteristics. By the time Maynard was back at the cabin his arm had grown accustomed to the soft baby flesh, a delight he had never before experienced. He put the kitten on the table and diluted a cup of condensed milk to the consistency directed on the label as the proper proportion for young children. After a few attempts he succeeded in getting the kitten to suck a soft rag, one end of which he had immersed in the milk.

Three times that night Maynard fed the kitten. By morning he had entirely forgotten his intention to kill the little lion. He also ignored the fact that those baby paws which it was so pleasant to hold in his hand would one day bear talons two inches long, capable of disemboweling him at one stroke, as the kitten's mother had done with the hound.

When Ken prepared to go to his claim for the day the kitten refused to be left behind and toddled after him to the door, fell over the doorstep, and got up looking so foolish and ashamed of his awkwardness that Maynard roared with laughter. "All right, Tommy, I guess I can carry you," he agreed, and the kitten went along, cozily nestled against Ken's blue shirt.

At the placer Tommy was perfectly willing to lie in the sun and sleep while Maynard worked at his sluice. Catlike, he had no taste for the splashing water about the flume. Ken looked up from his work frequently at the little ball of fur, and at noon he built a fire to warm milk for the kitten which twenty-four hours before he had been anxious to kill. Only once during the day did a cloud of displeasure pass across the face of the miner, and that was when he saw the wolfish face of "Snag" Keith turned toward his claim as the man mushed by on the trail to the Forks.

"I wonder why that crook always goes out of his way to pass my claim?" muttered Maynard. "It's shorter to go

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across the ridge, and just as easy a trail, yet every time he goes to the Forks he comes this way. Never seems to be lookin' at me, and yet I have the feelin' that he sees more than he appears to. They say he's a fur thief, robs the trap lines of the Indian trappers, and they are afraid to say anything about it because he's a white man. Maybe he's watchin' for a chance to plunder my cabin."

Ken Maynard spent little time in the settlements. His claim yielded a fair return for the work he put into it, and he was happily content to live in the forest, making friends of the wild things, working when the weather was good, and sitting snug and comfortable in his cabin when the storms raged across the mountains to cover the valleys with a soft white blanket and pile into the little canyons. But to-day he was seized with a sudden curiosity about Keith, and the latter had no sooner disappeared in the forest than Maynard picked up the baby lion and was on his way to the Forks, stopping at his own cabin only long enough to leave Tommy in a box under his bunk, and take a small buckskin bag of gold from its hiding place.

As he walked through the sunlit openings in the forest Maynard saw the moccasin tracks of Keith in the dry dirt. Ken was making this trip to the Forks solely because the trapper had come by his claim; he had no business in the trading post. He was merely following Keith because the instinct which becomes almost a sixth sense to outdoor men drew him to investigate the motives of the man; possibly strange fate led him toward an inevitable encounter.

The Forks Trading Post supplied a sparsely inhabited forest region on the headwaters of the Five Rivers country. Most of the wilderness dwellers were trappers, although a few prospectors placered along the streams, finding occasional rich gravel bars, but not sufficiently extensive to cause a stampede to the country. Maynard liked it all the better because there was little danger of extensive mining operations ever ripping up the peaceful valleys and converting the flower-decked meadows into unsightly heaps of boulders and débris.

At the store Maynard bought a few articles and a case of condensed milk, strapping his shoulder harness onto the box.

"That's a lot of milk for you to buy this time of year," said the trader, "most as much as you generally get for your winter's supply."

The prospector did not see fit to tell the man that he was raising a mountain lion on condensed milk. He paid his bill from the buckskin bag, and went to the next building, where he knew he would find Keith leaning against the bar. Maynard poured a drink and stood watching "Hunchy," the saloon swamper, as he sloshed water from a wooden tub over the rough floor. Keith stood in almost the exact spot where Maynard had expected to find him. Neither man spoke. Hunchy swung his mop and accidentally slopped water against Keith's beaded moccasins. Instantly the trapper whirled, spewing forth a torrent of abuse upon the crippled boy.

"Be careful how you throw water around here, or you'll be worse busted up than you are!" he snarled.

Hunchy tried to explain that his mop had caught on a nail and that that had caused the accident. The very fact that the cripple showed him sufficient courtesy to explain seemed to enrage Keith still more. He swung a vicious kick at Hunchy, and was still more angry when the blow failed to land as he intended. He threw a bar bottle at Hunchy's head, missed, and started to swing a vicious blow. Then something happened.

Maynard stretched out a long arm, caught Keith by the collar and jerked him violently, so that the surprised trap-

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per sat down in the tub of dirty water. Hunchy danced out of the way, his screeches of laughter sounding more like the cries of some animal than like those of a human being. Maynard laughed, too, and leaned carelessly against the bar. Keith came for him, crouching like an animal preparing to spring, his fingers working with the desire to throttle the man who had interfered with his sport of beating a helpless cripple. As he rushed, Maynard's right arm shot out with one quick, well-directed punch, and Keith settled backward, to lie outstretched on the floor. Hunchy made his way with awkward, sliding movements to Maynard's side.

"You've sure done it now," he said tremblingly. "He'll kill me when he comes to."

Maynard saw where this thing would certainly lead to tragedy for Hunchy. "How far can you walk?" he asked.

A gleam of amusement came into the eyes of the swamper. "Farther 'n you can, I guess. My legs are strong as they ever was. It was my back that was hurt by a fallin' tree and, while I can't walk pretty, I can git over the ground faster than most men."

Maynard disliked to take Hunchy to his cabin, but he could see no other way of protecting him from the wrath of the cowardly trapper. Keith would certainly seek revenge on the helpless boy at the first opportunity.

"Get your things," said Maynard. "You'll have to come to my camp with me for the present."

Thus it was that within three days Maynard's whole manner of life was changed. Instead of living alone with his dog, as he had before the old lioness had killed the hound, he now had the responsibility of raising a bottle baby and protecting a crippled boy.

Hunchy proved to be anything but a burden. He could travel rapidly through the forest with a curious, shuffling movement, which gave his body, shortened above his hips by the accident, the appearance of a giant monkey twisting along the trail. He was an excellent cook and kept Maynard's cabin spotlessly clean. He seemed to have an affection for Tommy that amounted to devotion. Denied the opportunity of expressing his really affectionate nature, this unfortunate being found his first real happiness in caring for the little lion.

Whatever plans Maynard had formed for disposing of Tommy to some zoo went glimmering when he saw this strange friendship between the human outcast and the baby of a despised race.

In a week Hunchy had taught the little lion to drink from a pan like any domestic cat, and had begun to snare small animals for him, cutting the flesh into tiny bits suitable for the kitten's mouth.

Maynard went daily to his placer, leaving Hunchy with the lion. He had little fear of Keith harming the cripple by going to his cabin when he was away, yet he was uneasy as to what might happen if Keith should pass and see Hunchy at the cabin alone. The miner was made still more alert the next time he went to the Forks. The barkeeper beckoned him to the rear of the room.

"You want to look out for Snag Keith," he told Maynard. "He tried to find out what became of Hunchy. I made him believe that the swamper cripple was so scared that he hit the trail for the mill camp ten miles below the Forks. Keith went down there lookin' for him and came back madder'n a snake. If I know anything about his kind, he'll ambush you. He's sure to find out some time that Hunchy is at your camp, and you know he'll beat him to death if he ever gets another chance."

"Thanks for tellin' me," said Maynard, and from that day forward he kept Hunchy with him on a pretence of having him help clean gold from the riffles.

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Lifted from the debased position of a saloon swamper, and treated as an equal, the hunchback became like a different being. He seemed to forget his physical condition in the freedom of the forest and the satisfaction of doing something to help the man who had saved him from being beaten by the trapper; and wherever Hunchy went the young lion followed him with an apparently faithful love not generally believed to exist in any member of the cat family.

By the time the first snows came Tommy was a long-legged, slender animal, his enormous feet out of all proportion to his size, his head beginning to assume the shape and appearance of a woods killer. He no longer troubled Hunchy to provide him with food but hunted for himself. The two continued to be inseparable, and more than once Maynard's blood chilled as he saw the sharp fangs of the lion snap within an inch of Hunchy's face as the two wrestled, rolling over each other. He noticed, however, that Hunchy had discovered a way to instantly quiet the brute, and that when he wanted Tom to stop he would force one hand against the big cat's windpipe, whereupon the lion would spring away from the boy, the end of his long tail twitching after the manner of a domestic cat.

About this time Ken noticed that the knifelike talons were beginning to show in the padded feet of the lion, and he realized that their pet was no longer a soft, helpless thing to be cuddled and cared for, but a half-grown lion which, because of its constant association with the two men, had no fear of human beings. He told Hunchy his fears.

"Old trappers and hunters agree that at one time the cougar was a vastly different creature from the cowardly skulker of to-day. Like the grizzly bear, once the boss of the mountain ranges, the lions have been forced to hide among the rocks, modern high-powered weapons proving too tough for them. But men still living remember when the big cats were considered dangerous, and tell of keeping fires all night to frighten them away. I've read how Lewis and Clark had trouble with grizzlies when they made their first trip up the Missouri. Now the grizzlies are as hard to hunt as deer, they're so sly. They've found a rifle will kill a long ways off and they take no chances whatsoever."

Hunchy smiled and smoothed Tom's head. "I'm not afraid of him," he said. "He knows I'm boss. Even when he gets mad, he don't go too far. I can make him stop any time."

"Sure you can now," Maynard replied, "when he's playing with you; but not being afraid of men, he's like an old-time panther, and if he was to get mad, you couldn't stop him any more than you could the wind."

During the winter the two men and the lion spent their time in and about the cabin. Maynard could not work his placer because the streams were nearly dry, but when the snow began to settle in the flats and the water to gurgle in the gulches, he spent long days repairing the flume and getting ready for the season's work. Twice during the winter he had seen Keith pass toward the Forks, but the trapper did not even look toward his camp as he mushed past on snow shoes.

Hunchy and Tom ranged the forest about the camp, and now for the first time the lion showed signs of uneasiness. He would leave his companion for hours while he hunted along the rocks and caverns.

"You can't change the nature of a cat," Maynard said. "They are not like the dog family. Even wild dogs half wolf can be domesticated and become loyal to the one who feeds them, but not so with any of the cats. They care for nothing but their own comfort. You'd better let me sell him to the zoo

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in Denver. I could get two hundred and fifty dollars for him, and you may have it."

"Two hundred and fifty!" Hunchy's face paled. "I've got a hundred and thirty saved up toward havin' an operation on my back. That doctor that was down at the Forks fishin' last summer said that there was a surgeon in Denver that could straighten me out for five hundred dollars." He stopped and looked at Tom, who was just then returning from one of his long absences. "I couldn't do it though, pen up a wild creature that loves life just as much as I do. I went to a zoo one time and saw the poor animals pacing back and forth, lookin' out at the sunshine and grass and the flowers blowin' in the wind. I just couldn't do that to Tom, it'd be worse 'n bein' crippled."

Hunchy stopped, and something choked in Maynard's throat. He laid his hand on the shoulder of the hunchback. "Never mind, Hunchy, we won't sell Tom. I'm like you. He belongs here as a part of the forest. If I make a good clean-up this summer, I'll help you get your back fixed."

Nothing more was said about the frequent trips into the forest made by the lion. He was now fully grown and able to bring down the largest bucks for food.

"That's the part I don't like about lions," said Hunchy, "killin', always killin', to live."

"It's the way of life," Maynard said. "The lion kills deer, grouse, rabbits. Man kills cattle, sheep, chickens. The only difference is that they kill to satisfy hunger, while we kill to tickle our taste, or for sport. I don't hate lions because they kill, but it's the sneakin', cowardly way they have of doin' it—like a thief crawlin' in the window because he's too lazy or spineless to work. A lion never gives game a chance, he lies in wait along the trail, hid in the tall grass, and takes the advantage. He never goes out square in the open and fights like a wolverene, for instance."

Next day Maynard was shoveling gravel into the sluice boxes, and as the muddy water rolled away over the riffle he caught the unmistakable glint of gold as a nugget too large to catch on the low bars rolled down the sluice. He sprang forward, hurrying to get below the spot, and with a shout of joy he picked up a piece of brown hematite held together with stringers, chunks and nuggets of gold. "Turn off the water, quick! We've really struck a pocket!" he called to Hunchy.

The cripple covered the intervening space in a surprisingly short time and pushed shut the little head-gate. As the water lowered in the flume, draining out so that the boards were revealed, several small nuggets and a quantity of coarse gold could be seen above the cross pieces nailed on the bottom of the flume. The rest of that day the two men were busy cleaning up the gold. They went to the cabin late, and Maynard was chopping firewood when he heard an ejaculation from Hunchy. A moment later the hunchback came to the door, holding up an empty baking powder can for the miner to see.

"We're plumb out of bakin' powder, and I haven't any sour dough started to make bread with!"

But who would mind a little hardship like doing without bread for a day or two in the presence of the glamor of a gold strike?

"Boil some potatoes. We can get along without bread for a meal or two. I'll go to the Forks to-morrow and bring in a load of grub," Maynard suggested.

By the flickering light of the candle that night Maynard and Hunchy examined the little pile of gold spread on a paper on the table, looking at nuggets, allowing the coarse gold to drift through between their fingers to make little yellow ridges and mountains.

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"How much do you suppose we cleaned up?" asked Hunchy.

"More'n a thousand dollars," Maynard replied, "and we haven't got into the pocket yet. I'd only put a few shovels of gravel into the flume when I saw that gold. As soon as I get back from my trip to-morrow we'll start to wash again and see how wide the bar is. We can't tell anything about how far up the gulch it extends."

Hunchy sighed. "You're rich."

Maynard did not reply. He knew that the boy was thinking about his back and wishing for enough of the gold so that he might go to Denver for the operation. Maynard had plans, but he would not reveal them now, to-morrow, perhaps. He left camp early in the morning, gloriously happy. Beside the little-used trail through the forest flowers nodded to him. From the branches overhead came the calls of birds busily engaged in selecting places for nests, and finding it difficult because there were so many equally lovely spots. In a pool of sunlight at the edge of a tiny park he saw a pair of big ears and the disproportionately little face of a fawn hidden beside an old moss-covered log.

Life indeed held great joy for the man this morning, free to go where he pleased. Now he could enjoy the things he had always wanted to do, and as he planned long canoe journeys into the Far North after he had exhausted the riches of the bar, he thought of the crippled boy, his back straightened, healed, as his companion.

Maynard spent but little time at the Forks. Before noon he was trailing back over the sweet-scented woods path, still in a dreamy condition of joyous anticipation. He smiled when he came to the camp and saw the door to the cabin closed. Hunchy was down at the flume in all probability, working to clean more gold from the riffles. He pushed open the door, and sensed calamity. Everything seemed as usual about the cabin, except that his rifle was not in its accustomed place. Probably Hunchy had taken it down to the flume, something which he very rarely did. Still, there was a strange sense of desertion, of crime, of intrigue, which came to Maynard all the more forcibly because of the exalted state of mind he had been enjoying all day.

He started to go out, when his eye caught the unmistakable yellow of gold dust on the floor. Instantly he was down on his knees examining the cache where he had kept the gold. It was empty. For a moment he felt as if he had received a sudden physical blow. Then the thought came to him with great relief that Hunchy had probably carried the gold down to the flume in order to watch it. Maynard laughed in a strained, half assured manner. How foolish he had been! Why, for a moment he had believed that Hunchy was a thief. Faithful, loyal Hunchy, for whom he had a surprise in the pocket of his shirt. How silly!

He ran down to the creek, stumbling over the round boulders below the flume, and rushed to the head gate. The gate was closed. He looked up and down the flume, but not a sound or a motion broke the stillness of the summer afternoon. Maynard sat down on a log. He suddenly felt very old. There was no comfort in the fact that the main portion of his fortune was still in the bar. He realized now how much he had grown to care for Hunchy—and Hunchy was a thief. He had not been able to trust Maynard to give him the money for the operation. He had taken all the gold from the cache, the only weapon in camp, and had sneaked away, like a yellow, sneaking cat. That's what he was, and that was why he and Tom got along so well together. They were both naturally skulkers.

Maynard sat for some time, his head in his hands, debating whether to follow Hunchy and recover the stolen gold.

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Then, as in the case of the baby lion, the generosity of the man outweighed his hatred. No, he would let him go. There was more gold in the bar than he needed, more than he could ever spend. He got up and walked slowly back to the camp. All the joy of the forest life had gone. The sunshine gave him no comfort, the call of birds irritated him. They seemed to be laughing at him for his credulity in trusting a saloon swamper. Two noisy crested bluejays were particularly saucy. Maynard threw a stick at them and went on.

Ten feet from the door he saw the outline of a track in the dust, a moccasin track. Neither Hunchy nor Maynard wore moccasins. He fell on the ground beside the imprint, studying it closely. The toes did not point in like an Indian's. Carefully he moved the distance a man would step, and looked again. Yes, there it was, a bit plainer now. Light was breaking in Maynard's mind. He remembered Keith's fancy moccasins over which Hunchy had slopped the water, and how he had watched those same tracks that day in the trail. They were about the same size and shape.

Maynard ran to each of the two trails leading into the forest in the opposite direction from the Forks. In the first one the twigs and grass had not been disturbed, but in the other the moccasin tracks showed plainly where Keith had come and gone back the same way. Maynard followed a few yards and saw Hunchy's easily recognized track, with his strange, sliding, twisting motion, and the tracks of the cripple covered Keith's at intervals.

For an instant, as understanding came to him, Maynard wanted to yell, to laugh at the birds that had ridiculed him, to tell them that Hunchy was not a thief. Then moisture broke out on his forehead as he thought of the cripple following the wily woodsman. Hunchy knew nothing of the dangers he was facing. Keith would be watching his back track, and would be sure to see Hunchy in time to ambush him. He would gloat over this opportunity to meet the cripple alone in the woods, away from Maynard's protection.

The only weapon at the camp was the ax. The miner ran to the woodpile and picked it up. As he swung it over his shoulder Tom lazily came out of the bushes, licking his chops. He had just finished eating a snowshoe rabbit, and stood contentedly lashing his long tail slowly over his body. Instantly a use for the cat came to Maynard. One of Hunchy's games was to hide from Tom in the forest, and make the lion find him, which he always did easily.

Maynard called the lion to him and showed him the tracks in the trail. Tom sniffed contemptuously. He did not care to play. He was full now, and much preferred to sleep in the sun. Maynard pointed to the tracks again. "Find Hunchy, Tom, come on, find him."

The big cat took a step or two forward and put his nose to the ground, this time on one of Keith's tracks. In all his life he had never smelled any other human being than Maynard and Hunchy. The short hair along his neck raised, and he gave a low, puzzled growl, drawing his lips back, and showing the long, sharp ivory fangs.

"Come on, Tom, let's find him!" Maynard ran up the trail, Tom trotting easily behind him. The miner, of course, had no way of knowing how long since either of the men he was following had passed, but he figured out pretty closely what had happened. Hunchy must have gone to the flume, as Maynard had at first supposed. He had probably worked there till noon, or perhaps later. Keith passing the cabin on his way to the Forks, had seen that the camp was unoccupied, and supposed that both Hunchy and Maynard were at the flume.

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This was the opportunity for which the trapper had been waiting. This was the reason he had gone this trail so many times. He had hoped some time for this very chance to rob Maynard's cache. Hunchy, coming to camp for lunch, had either seen the thief, or else had discovered the theft and had taken the rifle and followed.

It was now two o'clock. Hunchy was probably not over an hour ahead of him, perhaps not that. Maynard, heedless of the long trip he had already made that day, ran until the pounding of the blood in his temples warned him that he must slow down. At the top of the next ridge the tracks left the path, leading straight across the flat top of the hill toward the very rim rock where Maynard had killed Tom's mother. The man stopped, uncertain as to the trail, but the lion seemed at last to be taking an interest in the game. He sniffed at the grass, trotted a few steps, sniffed again, and then, satisfied that he knew, he went forward at a gait that put Maynard to the best speed he could muster in order to keep up.

At a point fifty yards from the edge of the rim rock Tom was leading a course parallel to the canyon when he suddenly stopped and stood, his long, slim neck stretched toward the rim. A slight breeze was blowing from that direction. The lion turned and crept forward as if stalking game, his slender body crouched almost to the grass. Panting, sobbing for breath, Maynard staggered behind him, trying to steady the pounding of his heart so that he could speak to the cat. A fear had come to him as he saw the lion slipping forward, that Tom would spring upon Hunchy as he might upon a rabbit or a deer. He could make no sound, and struggled on, trying to overtake the cat and calm his evident excitement.

Maynard had never fully trusted the lion, and there was something so terribly ferocious about him now that the man suspected that for some reason the brute had turned killer. At the edge of the rim rock the lion stopped and sat down like a dog, looking over into the little valley thirty feet below. Maynard stood beside him, still fighting against the effects of his overexertion.

Almost immediately below them Maynard could see Hunchy walking slowly, painfully on the tracks of the trapper. Not accustomed to trailing, he was having trouble in following the light imprints made by moccasins. Maynard tried to call to him, but his vocal chords only succeeded in delivering a queer little squeak. Tom looked up the canyon and growled again. His neck hair raised, and he ran along the rim looking for some place where he could get down. Maynard saw too, saw Keith crouched behind a large boulder, He had craftily made a plain trail close to the rock so that the unsuspecting Hunchy would be sure to walk within easy reach.

The rifle in the cripple's hand would be of no more value than a stick, once Keith's long arms gripped his victim. A sob of despair came from Maynard as he realized his helplessness and the certain destruction that awaited Hunchy who, forgetting his handicap and heedless of the fact that Keith was his own personal enemy, had followed the trapper in an effort to regain the stolen gold. It was all so pitifully tragic, the boy painstakingly following the trail to a certain cruel death, unconscious of his danger.

Tom had disappeared. Maynard thought that perhaps the cat had found a crevice down which he might crawl, and he ran along the top as well as he could in his exhausted condition, looking for the crack down which Tom had gone. He stopped directly opposite the rock where Keith lay watching, and at that instant the trapper sprang like some wild animal, grappling Hunchy, and

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forcing him backward upon the grass; but Keith had not realized the strength in Hunchy's limbs, and while he gripped him tightly about the body, Hunchy was fighting fiercely with his sinewy legs. Once he succeeded in breaking the hold of the brutal attacker, and Maynard breathed more freely. If only Hunchy could get time to cock and fire the rifle! But this he failed to do, and in an instant Keith was upon him again, his face livid with anger, the terrible protruding tooth which had given him the name of snag looking like the fang of an animal.

It was then, as Hunchy's destruction seemed inevitable, that Maynard again saw Tom standing on a ledge above a scrubby spruce which grew up from the valley twenty feet below where the lion stood. Tom was watching the unequal fight angrily, his long tail lashing back and forth. A cry of pain was wrung from Hunchy's lips, and this seemed to stir the lion like the call of a wounded mate.

As softly as big snowflakes fall upon the long boughs of the spruce, the lion dropped from the ledge into the top of the tree, balanced there for a fraction of a second with matchless grace, and then jumped to the ground. Keith was now forcing his hands around the throat of Hunchy, who seemed to be unconscious. The lion sprang again, this time to land near Keith and facing him. With a motion of his right paw so swift that Maynard could hardly see the movement, he struck, and the great, cruel talons cut like pieces of steel.

With a howl Keith jumped up. If he had stood still the lion would probably not have attacked him farther, but he ran. This was the way the game did when Tom failed to kill with a blow such as he struck Keith, and probably he sprang instinctively. Whether his motive was revenge or only the natural result of the excitement, the result was equally disastrous. With a spring which carried him completely over the body of his fallen master, Tom lit on the back of Keith, his head shot forward with one snap which severed the spinal cord. Almost at the same instant that he delivered this one rapier-like thrust, Tom leaped far to one side as if to avoid the death struggles of his victim, and turned back to stand beside Hunchy, sniffing at him.

Maynard ran down the edge of the rim rock until he found the place where Hunchy had followed Keith into the canyon, and made his way as quickly as possible to where the two men lay. Keith was dead, but as he picked Hunchy up in his arms there came a little sigh and a feeling of warm breath upon Maynard's cheek. He carried him to the cabin, and was relieved to find his little pal was not seriously hurt. As soon as Hunchy could stand the trip, they went on to Denver, that miracle spot of Hunchy's dreams. There Hunchy had his operation, and became a strong, well boy again.

Maynard stayed in Denver until his friend was well on the way to recovery. Before he left for the Forks he sat by Hunchy's bedside. "That day you and I will never forget—when I went to the Forks I had this paper made out. It's a deed to a half interest in the claim. When you're able to come back, we'll have some good times up there takin' out that gold."

Hunchy sighed, "It'll be heaven to be there now that I don't have to be afraid of Keith."

When Maynard reached his cabin he found all as he had left it. There were lion tracks about the dooryard, but Tom did not come back again. He had followed his wild instincts and probably had found a mate. In the fall Hunchy came back to live with Maynard, to revel in the sweet odor of ripened grasses and to watch the hills turn yellow and gold and brown.

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Trail of the Buzzard

By Robert J. Horton

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters.

TO capture The Buzzard, robber and killer, Sheriff Mack enlists Alex Lamont, outlaw, with whom he has a truce. Their conference is disturbed by a Mexican, José, who says Lamont's hostesses, Dolores and Señora Guerra, are his cousin and aunt. The Buzzard arrives. José tries to arrange a similar truce for him. Mack temporizes. Lamont kills The Buzzard, who is José's father, refuses the reward, and ends the truce.

Free again, Lamont robs The Green Parrot at Kerrville. "Big Mike," the crooked proprietor, and "Blackie" Evans pursue him. José befriends Lamont. He, too, loves Dolores, who is really the daughter of Don Juan Martinez, killed in a revolution, and he and his aunt are her servants. Dolores promises to marry Lamont if he reforms. They are trailed by Evans. José takes Dolores home. Lamont goes to give the loot to Mack. Meanwhile, Mack has hired the Weasel to find Lamont. The Weasel meets Evans and plans to double cross the sheriff. Lamont hands over the loot, and is protected by Mack from Deputy Anderson of Kerrville. Anderson departs, furious. Mack now hears Lamont's story.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE SHERIFF HEARS.

PUFFING slowly on his big black cigar, Sheriff John Mack studied the man across from him. Lamont was rolling a cigarette with meticulous care. It was the face which interested the sheriff. It was a strong face, he decided—clean-cut, forceful, and showing strength of character. Why, thought the sheriff, should such a man deliberately choose the dangerous career of outlawry? At this very moment, Lamont looked up, and the sheriff almost started at the clear, keen gaze Lamont bent upon him. The sheriff took his cigar from his mouth. He did not know just how to begin. He had sent for Lamont for a purpose, but to get that purpose and what it portended properly before the man now became a problem.

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"Where did 'The Weasel' find you?" he asked, as Lamont lighted his cigarette.

Lamont looked at him in surprise. "The Weasel?" he said, wrinkling his brow. "I haven't even seen The Weasel."

It was the sheriff's turn to be astonished. He sat up in his chair. "I sent The Weasel out to find you. Promised him a thousand dollars if he found you an' told you that I wanted to see you. I deposited five hundred in the bank for him, gave him a hundred for expense money, an' told him he could have the other five hundred after he had found you an' delivered my message an' I had proof of it."

The two men stared at each other.

"Well, sheriff," said Lamont with a wry smile, "I haven't seen any Weasel, an' I might not have trusted his message if I had seen him. I reckon you don't quite know The Weasel as well as I do, sheriff. He isn't to be trusted, because he can't trust himself. Anyway, I haven't seen him."

"You rode in for refuge from that fool Anderson an' his posse, then?" said the puzzled official.

"Wrong again," smiled Lamont. "I didn't know they were anywhere aroun' until this morning, an' then I had to race them in. I started for here to see you four an' a half days ago, sheriff, an' I sure put my horse through his paces to get here."

"You came of your own accord?" asked John Mack incredulously.

"Yep. Came of my own accord an' brought along every cent that I took in that Kerrville holdup. I had an idea you'd put it in your safe. You know a while back, sheriff, you came up to Seymore to ask me to do you a favor, as you put it. Well, I've come to ask you to do me a favor, or rather to tell me how I can do myself a favor."

The sheriff's eyes had widened in wonder. Could it be——

"Lamont, how'd you come to pull that job?" he asked earnestly.

Lamont looked critically at his cigarette end. "Pure an' simple cussedness, I reckon."

John Mack shook his head. "No," he said decisively, "it wasn't that. I knew you were going to break out. I could see it in your eyes that morning when you stood on the porch of the cabin up in the Antelopes. Tell me what it is, Alex; can't you control it?"

Lamont smiled. "You wouldn't understand, sheriff," he said softly; "for I don't understand myself. Anyway, now it doesn't matter."

John Mack's conscience was troubling him again. "I feel that I'm to blame," he said. "If I hadn't——"

"Stop that!" Lamont interrupted sharply. "You had nothing to do with it at all. Nothing, understand? It was due, that's all. Now I'm not here to make excuses, Mack, but I will say that I don't really know for sure if I intended to pull a job when I left Seymore or not. That may sound strange, but it can't be any stranger to you than it is to me. My first idea was to do some tall gambling in fresh fields."

"An' you headed for Kerrville where it can be done," the sheriff prompted.

"Exactly." Lamont nodded. "I had a little run-in with a 'Big Black' Evans there in The Green Parrot. Ever hear of him?"

"Too much," scowled the sheriff. "He hadn't better show up aroun' here. He'd bad medicine."

"So they told me after I'd called him," said Lamont dryly. "After that business I was at the bar, while 'Big Mike' was shooting off his mouth. They were talking about 'The Buzzard's' holdup in Pinola, an' he was explaining right handsome what he'd do if a lone bandit tried to hold him up. Just like that, it was. Somebody joked him about his place being a holdup, an' he boasted as how he did his stealing right out in

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the open, but the suckers couldn't see how he did it. That got a great hand. An' he boasted how much money he had an' said big bills was nothing to him when I sprung a blue one on him. I pricked up my ears at that."

Lamont's cigarette had gone out and he paused to relight it, while the sheriff leaned on his desk and waited for him to resume.

"I decided to 'take' Big Mike. Now, remember what I said about not being here to make any excuses, sheriff. I'm guilty as thunder. It was pride in my —er—profession that led me to do the job. I did it up sweet"—Lamont's eyes sparkled—"an' I had Big Mike so white aroun' the gills he looked like something a blizzard had blown in." Lamont paused again, his eyes shining at the memory of it. "Oh, it was sweet, sheriff, an' what's more I had no more idea of ever feeling bad over it than I had of blowing my brains out. Even now, I'm proud of the job!"

John Mack knew better than to disturb the thread of the remarkable narrative to which he was listening.

"Well, I made a clean get-away an' hid out in a place I know down there in the Wizards, an' let the posse an' this Black Evans go by to look for me. But José—— You remember him? Well, José had come over from Seymore. He was in Kerrville when I pulled my trick. He knew this hiding place of mine, an' he followed along an' found me there."

Lamont threw away his cigarette end and shifted in his chair so he could look out the window. His voice carried a new and softer tone when he spoke again.

"José said Dolores wanted me to meet her over in Running Wells. I told him he was a liar an' that he wanted to get me over there where the old Buzzard gang, or what was left of 'em, could get a crack at me. Then he told me, finally, that as a last resource Dolores had instructed him to tell me this story."

There was a long pause. Lamont looked at the sheriff, who was listening intently; then he shifted his gaze again to the window. In a low voice, with frequent pauses, Lamont recited the story of Dolores Martinez, while John Mack hung on his every word. When he had finished, Lamont rolled another cigarette. The sheriff sensed keenly that it was not yet time to speak. Lamont lighted his smoke, inhaled twice, and went on.

"So I went over there with José, an' when we got there—it was night—he took me into an adobe an', sure enough, there in a rear room was Dolores." There was another long pause. "I never knew or realized she was so beautiful until then—as she stood over by the window waiting for me. I hadn't thought very seriously about the girls before, John, but Dolores—that night—after I had heard her story, too—I suddenly wanted her an' realized I had wanted her all the time."

Lamont turned, rested on his elbows on the desk, and stared down at its surface.

"Anyway"—his voice was very low now—"we found out we love each other. I told her I wasn't good enough for her, an' all that, but she wouldn't hear of it. I've been a lonely man, sheriff, riding a lone trail since I was a kid. I've had to fight my way. How I got into—into that other game—I don't just know. It happened so graduallike. Now I'm sorry for it. Still, if I'd never been in it, I'd never met Dolores. I might have met a girl as sweet an' good, but I can't imagine where there'd be one."

Still the sheriff remained silent, but his eyes were sparkling.

"I asked Dolores—to marry me. An' she said she would. We're engaged. An' here I'd just gone an' done this thing—the job at Kerrville. I mean. I told her about it. She asked me to promise I'd never hit the hard trail

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again. At first I resented her asking that. Then I promised her. An' then I was glad. I'll keep my promise."

He looked up suddenly into John Mack's eyes, and the official knew he spoke the truth.

"After that——" He told the sheriff of the escape through the window after the arrival of Morgan; of the fight with Black Evans and the part Dolores had taken in it; of the flight; of the arrival of José and the news he brought of the killing of Morgan; of the departure of José and Dolores for Seymore; of his decision to come to see him—the sheriff.

"So that's how I come to be here, sheriff," he concluded, with a smile; "to see if you can point a way out for me. But"—his eyes flashed fire and his tone was fierce—"they cannot take her away from me, an' they can't keep me from her!" He rose with features stern and his gaze hard, cold as steel. "I'd shoot my way through that posse or out of this office to get back to her. They can't jail me, unless they take me in feet first! An' that goes, John Mack!"

For answer, the sheriff rose and offered his hand. "I'm your friend, Alex," he said simply. "An' every word you've said has been music in my ears. We're getting close to the end of the trail of The Buzzard at last."

Lamont took the hand in a firm clasp. "Now, sheriff, let's get down to business. You an' I both know that Big Mike don't think any more of money than he does of both his eyes. He wants that cash back, an' it's in your safe. I haven't even counted it, but it's all there. I turn it over to you unconditionally, or rather on one condition: that Big Mike refuses to prosecute. He'll be tickled to death to meet that condition. I didn't violate my—treaty, I suppose you'd call it—with you, but——"

"You've got Kerr County to contend with," the sheriff supplied.

The official rose and paced the floor, as he always did when he was thinking hard. He took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. Suddenly he turned on Lamont. "What would you do if everything was made right?" he asked.

"I'd marry Dolores an'——" Lamont found himself without words. "I hadn't got that far, sheriff," he confessed finally. "It's something new to me to feel that I want to be right good."

"Well, you haven't had much time," said the sheriff absently. "Somehow, I feel like the two of us are a pair of culprits. Have you had anything to eat? Neither have I. We'll go up to my house an' eat. Come on."

"I don't reckon anybody much knows I'm in town, but they would know me an' it wouldn't look very good for me to be seen with you, would it?" said Lamont. "I mean, it wouldn't look very good for you, do you think?"

"Well," drawled John Mack, with a twinkle in his eyes, "I haven't been sheriff of this county for thirty years for nothing an' even if I am getting silly or something in my old age, like that Kerrville deputy suggested, I've got a friend or two here. I sent Merrill out to whisper a word or two in the right ears. I guess we can chance it."

And Sheriff John Mack and Alex Lamont walked boldly up the street and across to the sheriff's house. There Mrs. Mack had a meal for them. No one would have known by her words or actions that she was hostess to a character whose name even at that moment was stirring the south desert country to a frenzy.

After they had eaten, the sheriff led Lamont to a bedroom. "I'll bring back some clean things for you," he promised. "Take a bath an' crawl between the sheets an' get a good sleep. You can shave when you get up. To-night we start for Kerrville."

He went out, stopped at the jail, and dispatched Merrill to the house. "Just

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sit around," he said. Then he went down to the bank and withdrew the deposit he had made for The Weasel. He sauntered into a general store and made some purchases. Then he returned to his office, closed the door, and spent fully half an hour at the telephone. It was not a local call.

Once again John Mack dozed in his swivel chair with his feet on his desk. Through the afternoon the heat beat down and a merciless sun swung slowly down the slaty western sky.

At five o'clock, Anderson, the Kerrville deputy, stamped into the office. "Don't forget, you old codger——"

John Mack leaped to his feet and was around the desk in a twinkling. Anderson was so taken aback that he nearly fell getting out of the office.

"Listen to me!" rang John Mack's voice. "Take your men an' get out of my territory—an' stay out! An' if you don't start pronto, I'll spank you in front of your men! You're going to find out shortly that I'm not the old fool you think I am. You'll find out sooner than that if you don't get moving!"

He grasped the deputy by the shoulder, spun him about, and sent him stumbling down the steps.

Twenty minutes later the posse rode out of town.

CHAPTER XXVI.

BLACK EVANS' SCHEME.

ON the western slope of the high mountain which hemmed in the valley wherein Seymore was situated were several draws. At the upper end of one of these draws, well off the dangerous and little-used western trail, Blackie Evans and The Weasel had made camp after a long, roundabout ride to reach the spot. So far as they knew, they had not been seen since they had met south of Bayneville. They had seen the posse in time to circle far to eastward out of sight.

The Weasel was still dubious and uncertain to an extent, but he was dominated by the stronger will of Evans. Moreover, the little man felt, as indeed Lamont had felt, the old, powerful lure of the trail of danger and adventure and outlawry. Lacking Lamont's force of character, he had permitted himself to be led, but, had he been left to himself, he never would have deliberately taken the step which was to put him again within the shadow of the law.

Evans was frying bacon and getting the supper this evening. He was in a jovial mood, and he recognized the need for keeping The Weasel's spirits high. "Twenty-five thousand won't be so bad, eh, Weasel?" he said for the hundredth time. "No, they needn't know you were in on the deal at all. You have a perfect right to be away from Bayneville an' up here or anywhere else, for you're supposed to be lookin' for Lamont, don't you see? Why, you could even go back to Bayneville, if you wanted, afterward. An' I'm not one to tell you what to do."

"That's right," said The Weasel in his half-whining voice. "I don't want to be out in the open in this business. An' there's one thing we got to look out for, Black; we've got to be careful. I don't like to be mixed up in a job that's got a woman in it, for those jobs are too apt to go wrong. We got to be awful careful."

"You just leave that end of it to me," said Evans, nodding cheerfully. "You're not traveling with any dummy; I guess you know that. We'll just make a perfectly legitimate clean-up an' beat it. This is a big country, Weasel, an' it's full of hide-outs, an' fresh towns, an' the like. We're not so far from the border, either. Plenty of places to spend money, or save it. A man don't need any more than we're goin' to get to last him the rest of his life, if he uses it proper."

"We're dealin' with dynamite, too,

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Black, don't forget that," The Weasel warned.

"I can take care of him, if it should come to a show-down—which it won't," said Evans. "Think he's goin' to take any chances when he finds out, so he'll think, there's only one knows the secret hiding place where we'll have——"

"Ssssh!" cautioned The Weasel. "Don't talk so loud. Oh, I know there's nobody aroun' but us, but it's just when there's nobody aroun' that somebody hears something; just like it's the gun that ain't loaded that always goes off an' kills somebody."

Blackie Evans laughed. But he lowered his voice. He had to humor The Weasel at this time. Later—— Black Evans' eyes hardened. When this humor came upon him he was careful not to look at his companion. The Weasel was not altogether a fool, at that. But, twenty-five thousand dollars for that little shrimp? A goodly sum, he thought.

He caught The Weasel looking at him in a queer way and could not resist a start. It was as if his companion could read what was in his mind. He would have to watch The Weasel; for the latter had a reputation for being tricky, and might even have a plan of his own! In fact, the more he thought of it, the more plausible this seemed. Blackie Evans' suspicions ripened rapidly. He began to doubt the wisdom of having taken The Weasel in on the deal at all. But he had to have some one to help him carry out the nefarious scheme he had concocted, and The Weasel had seemed the most likely material. But he would take care of him when the time came. Meanwhile, he would watch him closely.

After they had eaten, Evans went over his plan with his companion for the tenth time. Every detail was considered from every angle. Blackie Evans liked to go over this plan because in outlining it aloud he got a better perspective on it. Late into the night he talked.

"An' there's one man we've got to watch," he concluded. "It's that shiny little Mex they call José. I wouldn't trust him a white chip's worth. Not because he's clever; he ain't. But he's sneaky. If I have to, I'll put him out of the picture." The Weasel saw the big man's eyes glow with an evil light and he knew he would have to keep a sharp watch on Evans himself. As the latter suspected, The Weasel was not altogether a fool. But if he had any plan of his own, he gave no outward indication of it.

The next morning The Weasel was delegated to visit Seymore. He was to ascertain first of all if Lamont was there or had been there. He also was to learn if José was there, and if Dolores was at the cabin of the Señora Guerra. Evans sent him on this errand because he could ask questions which he, Evans, could not ask without exciting suspicion, and could even visit the Guerra cabin under the pretext of seeking word of Lamont. He had a legitimate excuse for seeking Lamont, if it came to a show-down.

The Weasel was also instructed, which was most important, to find out where Dolores was accustomed to take her rides, and at about what hours. For Evans knew something of her habits, although he did not divulge the source of this knowledge.

It was necessary for The Weasel to take a dangerous game trail about the high shoulder of the mountain so he could slip down into the valley from the north slope, where there was much timber. This was the same way in which Lamont had taken John Mack back down into the valley after his rescue from The Buzzard.

While The Weasel was away, Evans proposed to take up his station on a high ridge above the little valley where he could look down on the town.

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"Now, listen, Weasel, don't forget we've got a lot at stake in this business," Evans warned. "Stand right up on your hind legs an' look every man square in the eyes. There'll be some down there who know you, an' you're the kind that's got a right to be there. Don't tell anybody your business. You must see the girl an' tell her you're lookin' for Lamont. That'll be safe because you can prove if it ever should be necessary, that you did have a message for him. You've got to make it secretive like an' get in her confidence. But don't talk to her when anybody's aroun'—understand? Good. An' watch out for that sneak of a José. You can tell him the minute you see him by the flashy way he dresses. An' listen, Weasel"—Evans' tone was stern and his eyes hardened—"we understand each other, eh?"

"I reckon so," said The Weasel with a blank stare.

"It would be bad for us to have any trouble between ourselves," said Evans significantly. This was the closest he had come to a threatening attitude.

"Don't see why we should have," said The Weasel blandly.

"Just so you know that now you've gone into this thing, I expect you to go through it," said Evans, managing a smile. "So long, an' good luck. Better make it back afore dark because that's a mighty bad trail."

The Weasel nodded coldly. "I'm used to 'em," he said.

Blackie Evans was angry with himself for his last words as The Weasel left. They might be taken to hint of suspicion on his part. He had spoken in too threatening a tone, he was afraid. It might scare the smaller man out of the deal entirely. It might even set him to thinking of too many possibilities. Just as The Weasel's chief fault lay in indecision, so Evans' failing lay in his inclination to talk too much, and at the wrong time.

As a matter of fact, he had set The Weasel to thinking. The tone of his voice and the look in his eyes had had their effect. The Weasel was wondering just how far he could trust the bigger man. He was willing to take his chance in a gun play, although he believed Evans might prove faster with his weapon. But he did not for a moment feel convinced that Evans could best Lamont in such a clash. And now for the first time The Weasel considered the possibility of a double cross. Again and again he asked himself how far he could trust Evans, and each time he groped for the answer in vain. Moreover, if he did meet Lamont in Seymore wouldn't he have to deliver his message to explain his presence there? Wouldn't he have to deliver it to protect himself? Wouldn't that spell the failure of Evans' scheme, and, if the plan was going to fall through, shouldn't he, The Weasel, profit by it—and have Lamont to back him up? But overriding these conjectures and possibilities was the lure of the money. Twenty-five thousand dollars. Big Black Evans had him there!

The Weasel had been in Seymore just once before and that had been a long time ago. But possessing the memory which is natural to all followers of the lone trails, he remembered a good deal about the lay of the land. He had little difficulty in making his way around to the north slope, and he then slipped silently down through the thick stand of timber to the valley below. He took advantage of clumps of trees and arrived on the main trail leading up to town unobserved.

Once in Seymore, The Weasel turned naturally to the largest resort and entered Thompson's place. There was nothing about him to excite curiosity except that he was a stranger. But nothing in his dress or manner could distinguish him from the habitués of the town.

He ordered a drink at the head of the

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bar and his eyes roved over those in the place. He saw no one he knew and he saw no one he could assume was José. But when Thompson came out of his little private office he was recognized. Thompson never forgot a name or a face and boasted of this valuable trait.

He strolled the length of the bar. "'Lo, Weasel," he greeted pleasantly, although the words were accompanied by a keen look.

The Weasel could not remember the man's name. "Howdy," he replied. "Just takin' a couple before noon. Want one?"

Thompson nodded to the bartender. "Broke out again, Weasel?" he asked in the same amiable tone, pouring out his drink.

The Weasel was stuck for the proper reply. He knew this man was the proprietor, but how much did he know about him, The Weasel? "Just ridin'," he answered finally. Then, taking a bold step: "Lookin' for a friend of mine."

"Yes?" crooned Thompson. "Here's hoping you find him!" They drank. "Think he's aroun' here?"

"Dunno," said The Weasel uneasily. "Took a chance on lookin' in, anyway. You—you seen anything of Lamont?"

Thompson looked at him steadily for a few moments. "Not since he put the daylight through The Buzzard up here, an' that's a piece ago," he replied. "You heard about that, of course? I understand he turned a trick since then; you heard about that, too? Well, I haven't seen him since he left here." Thompson frowned. "I ain't caring much how soon he comes back, either," he added pointedly.

The Weasel's spirits rose. Lamont was not there and he would not be any too welcome when he did come. Not knowing the details of John Mack's visit, he could not know why Thompson should exhibit a coldness toward Lamont.

"Then I've come up here for nothing," he observed. "Oh, well, I didn't really expect to find him here."

"The girl in the Guerra cabin up the creek might know where he headed for," Thompson vouchsafed; "but I haven't any idea. They're out after him like flies, I hear." Thompson's tone was suggestive and it was plain he would welcome some information.

"So I understand," said The Weasel laconically, "but they won't get him—alive." He was glad the proprietor had mentioned the girl, for it gave him an excuse to go up there. "Who is this girl?" he asked innocently.

Thompson told him, and then The Weasel decided on another bold stroke. He nodded and said: "Yes, I've heard of her, an' I'm glad you mentioned her. I can't tell you everything, Mr.——"

"Thompson," the proprietor supplied.

"Well, there was another one that—I heard—might know something," The Weasel said, puckering his brow. "Mexican, I think he was—known as a flashy dresser."

"That would be José Guerra," said Thompson with another frown. "He's not aroun' here, either. He's not too popular just now. Guess I can't help you much, Weasel." He signaled the bartender. "Give this man another on me," he ordered. "So long, Weasel; see you before you go." He went out, leaving The Weasel to toy with his drink a space and do what for him was some very serious thinking.

Big Black Evans had been right. As long as he was in this thing he had to go through with it. And the sooner it was done, the better. He would use his own brains a bit.

He had lunch at the counter in the rear of the place after leaving his horse to be fed and watered at the little livery. After lunch he played stud poker for two hours and listened to every scrap of conversation he could hear, without obtaining any information.

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Then, in mid-afternoon, he rode up the valley to the Guerra cabin.

It was Dolores herself who greeted him as he dismounted at the front door. The Weasel's hat came off like magic, and he stared in fascination. Small wonder Lamont had fallen for this girl! Here was a beauty if The Weasel ever had seen one. So intent was he in admiring her that he did not hear her words as she asked him who he wanted.

"I want to talk to you alone for a minute," he said at last.

Her eyes clouded with doubt, then something akin to fear showed in the beautiful, dark orbs. Had something happened to her lover? "Come in," she invited, and led him into the living room of the cabin.

He looked about hastily and saw they were alone. Then he put his hat on the table and touched his fingers to his lips significantly.

"There is no one here," she said in a low voice. "Tell me what you want to say. No one can hear us."

"It is about Lamont,' he said in an undertone. "I——"

"Quick!" She grasped him by the arm. "Has something happened to him? Tell me!"

"Nothing has happened to him?" he told her. "You mustn't get excited, an' you must listen to what I've got to say, an' you mustn't tell anybody. You mustn't say a word to a soul, understand?"

"*Si*, señor," she said tremulously. "Do you bring word from Alex—from Señor Lamont? Who are you?"

"I cannot tell you who I am at present," replied The Weasel. "There is a very good reason an' you mustn't ask. An' I'm lookin' for Lamont. Do you know where he is?"

"No," said Dolores, shaking her head slowly. "And I'm worried. But if you have a message, you must know where he is. Have you brought a message?"

The girl's question gave The Weasel his great inspiration. "No," he replied; "but I may bring a message later—any time. Lamont will not come here himself; but I or another will come. Do you go riding every day?"

"Why, yes," said Dolores in an anxious voice. "Alex knows that. What a foolish question."

"It isn't as foolish as you think," said The Weasel, highly delighted with himself. "It is a matter of where you ride, understand? Every evening after sunset you must ride up the valley—'way up to where the trail over the west divide starts. Sooner or later—it might even be to-morrow night—a messenger will come to you up there at the end of the twilight. But you must tell no one. Lamont is in big danger, as you must know, an' he has to be careful. He may even come himself! Now, do you understand what you're to do? An' you'll keep it to yourself?"

"Yes, yes," the girl replied quickly. "I will do as you say and tell no one. But surely you can tell me if Señor Lamont is safe?"

"He's safe," The Weasel answered in a convincing voice. "Now I must go. It isn't safe for me to hang aroun' town, an' I'll be lighting out soon. Don't forget what I've told you."

He left the cabin very well satisfied with himself. The dangerous part for himself in the scheme was over. He rode jauntily down to town and played cards until sunset. When the twilight fell, he stole down the valley and up through the pines on the north slope. He threaded his way around the shoulder of the great mountain and without accident dropped down into the draw where the camp was located.

"You're late," growled Blackie Evans, surveying the smaller man suspiciously in the firelight. "What was the trouble?"

"Shut up!" The Weasel snapped out. "Gimme something to eat, an' then we got the whole night to talk!"

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CHAPTER XXVII.

KIDNAPED!

LABORING under the impression that she had indirectly received a message from Lamont that he was well and that she would soon hear from him, Dolores Martinez was in a furor of excitement. Ever since Lamont had left her and José in the lower hills she had worried night and day. This night she gave way to a jubilant feeling of expectancy, believing she soon would see him again. Therefore, the hints which The Weasel had thrown out found root in the fertile soil of her love for Lamont and her confidence in him. The Weasel's instructions were carefully obeyed. She gave no hint of his visit to Señora Guerra; she said nothing to any one. Thus she fell easy prey to the scheme of Blackie Evans and The Weasel.

Evans had listened attentively to his companion's recital of what had taken place in town and had expressed his satisfaction. He even went so far as to praise The Weasel for his cunning. There need be no violence involved in the carrying out of their plan. He was also surprised at The Weasel's brain work and secretly congratulated himself upon enlisting the little man's services in his project.

The next important move, aside from enticing the girl away from Seymore—which he believed would be easy now that The Weasel had prepared the way—would be made by Evans himself. It was he who would deal with Lamont. It can be said of Blackie Evans that he stood in fear of no man. He did not fear Lamont. He firmly believed that Lamont had had an advantage over him when he made his famous draw in Kerrville. He believed, too, that Lamont's proposal that they put their guns on the table and spin the wheel to see who would get his gun first had been a trick, and nothing else.

Meanwhile, Evans' respect for The Weasel increased and he realized that his plan to obtain the entire fifty thousand dollars would have to be carefully guarded as to his actions and looks. Evans began to consider the possibility of a double cross on the part of his companion. By nature he was suspicious. It was this trait which was to trip him up in the end.

The very next night The Weasel made a trip down the west trail accompanied by Evans. After the raid by the Buzzard gang the guard at the foot of this perilous and little-used trail had been withdrawn. However, to make sure the trail was open, The Weasel went ahead. If he were challnged, he could show reason for going to Seymore. But Evans did not wish to be seen until it was necessary.

Dolores, her heart in a flutter of hope and anxiety, rode up the valley after sunset and was met some distance from the west trail by The Weasel, who waited in the shelter of a clump of trees. His teeth flashed in a smile and he swept his sombrero low as he bowed in greeting.

"It is well you came early, señorita," he said, "for we have a ride ahead of us to—the meeting place."

The girl's eyes lighted eagerly. "You are going to take me to him?" she asked. "He has sent for me?"

"I am goin' to take you where you will meet him," said The Weasel. "But you will need some clothes—a few things for a few days. Can you go back an' get 'em without anybody knowing? Just a few things you can tie on the back of your saddle. You'll know what you need. If any one must know, you can come without them."

"Oh, I can get them," said Dolores hastily. "Señora Guerra is not at the cabin. But—how long——"

"Only a day or so," The Weasel said. "What Lamont intends to do, I don't know. But we'll meet him soon, an' then——" He shrugged. "It is his

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business. I am only a messenger to guide you to him. We must hurry an' nobody must know. Will you get your things an' come right back, señorita? For we must get started while it is still light."

Dolores' native caution and reasoning power had fled before the force of her love. Her single thought was of the joy of being reunited with Lamont. She promised The Weasel she would be right back and raced down the valley. At the cabin she made up a small pack of things she might need, selected a warm coat against the cool night of the high altitudes, secured a small pistol, and soon was in the saddle, riding back to keep the rendezvous with The Weasel.

The Weasel's eyes were bright with elation and admiration. She mistook his look for one of appreciation because of her promptness.

"Just follow along," her guide instructed. "It's a pretty bad trail, but you've a good horse an' there's no danger. I 'spect it'll be worth it when you meet your man."

Dolores rode behind him willingly, eagerly. Her trust and confidence in Lamont were so complete, so deep-rooted, that she never once considered the possibility that this might be a trick. Indeed, why should she consider such a possibility since she knew of no one in all that district who would have cause to trick her? Surely not the Buzzard band, for José now was their leader. Who else, then? She accepted The Weasel's statement that he was to lead her to Lamont in good faith. The very mention of Lamont's name carried magic. She rode secure in the thought, that she was with one whom Lamont had trusted and whom she could trust as well.

Some little time after they had passed, Blackie Evans fell in behind them. He was grinning with satisfaction. Still, there was a flickering doubt in his mind. He was suspicious because it all had been so easy. They had the girl. She did not know she was being kidnaped—probably never would know, until the blow-off, so to speak. And Lamont would empty the yellowbacks from his saddlebag willingly and on demand as ransom!

The stars and moon were lighting the way when they reached the pass over the divide.

Señora Guerra returned to the cabin in the late twilight. She had been in the Mexican quarter of the town visiting one of the few faithful friends she had. This friend was ill. It was seldom, except in an emergency of this kind, that the señora left her own abode.

She found Dolores gone, but thought nothing of it. Her horse also was gone, therefore, she was out for her evening ride, as was her custom. The señora sat in a rocking chair on the little porch and viewed the beauty of the valley, shrouded in the purple veils of the deepening twilight, and the high peaks which still glowed a faint pink in the last, lingering rays of the sunset.

Every moment she expected to hear the hoofbeats of Dolores' horse as the girl galloped home. Señora Guerra loved Dolores as she would have loved a daughter of her own. More so, perhaps, because of the great trouble which had been visited upon the girl. The señora was glad that Dolores was getting a fine man like the Señor Lamont—strong, brave, and handsome. She knew little of his life outside the valley and cared less. She could judge a man.

The first star shone high above the peaks and night began to fall. The señora listened in vain for the echoes of flying hoofs. More stars shone forth and soon the sky was alive with diamonds. And still no sign of Dolores! Señora Guerra went inside and moved about the cabin aimlessly. In her excitement and haste, the girl had not even

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scribbled a note of any kind to allay the older woman's anxiety. The señora was worried.

Time after time she went out upon the porch and listened. She heard nothing save the faint ripple of the stream and the light breeze sighing in the pines. Her worry became fear—fear for the safety of the girl. Her hands flew to her breast as she considered the possibility of harm having befallen Dolores. She might have been thrown from her horse. She might by lying unconscious even then somewhere in the valley. But would not the horse come home? She did not know. Never had Dolores stayed out so late before without the señora knowing where she was. A great fear came into the woman's heart. The agents of the monster—the Mexican revolutionist who had slain the girl's father and caused them to flee for their lives—might have learned their hiding place. Even after all these years, this man, if he were alive, or some of his lieutenants, might want Dolores. If she were so taken it would be worse than death. The señora's imagination ran riot. Two hours after night had fallen she was in a veritable frenzy. Dolores had practically no acquaintances in the town with whom she associated to any extent—none whom she would visit at this hour. Señora Guerra wished that José were there. She did not like José and was suspicious of him because she knew of his hot, flaming love for Dolores; and she had hated his father, The Buzzard, her dead husband's brother. But now she wished José present. Could it be—but no! José was too loyal to attempt to carry Dolores off by force.

An hour before midnight Señora Guerra could stand it no longer. She called to her single man-servant, who had just returned from town, and ordered him to saddle her horse and his own. He was to accompany her, she said. Did he know anything of the whereabouts of the señorita? Had he heard anything of her in the Mexican quarter? He had not. So the señora rode down to town and sent the man in to ask Thompson to come out for a few moments.

"It is the Señorita Dolores," she told the resort proprietor when he appeared. "She is gone. She has not come back from her ride."

"Well, that isn't altogether strange," grinned Thompson. "She's probably keeping a date with Lamont somewhere. Maybe he sneaked in for her an' she's gone away with him." His grin became broader.

"It is not so!" exclaimed the señora in a fiery voice. "She would leave word for me if she was going away. If she was with the Señor Lamont, I would not be afraid. But she would not go and not tell me or leave word. She has maybe had the accident and is hurt somewhere."

"Not that girl," said Thompson easily. "She's too good a rider, señora, an' you know it as well as I do. What do you want me to do? I haven't anybody to send out lookin' for her. Why don't you go to your own people? They ought to get up a searching party without much trouble. They all look on her as a sort of queen. If I thought it was a matter of life an' death—but I don't think so. If she's left the valley she's gone with Lamont. Come to think of it, there was a fellow in here yesterday who said he was lookin' for Lamont. He went up to your place to ask the girl about him. I'll bet he had a message for her. He's gone, an' now you say the girl's gone. Chances are they went together an' that he's taking her to Lamont. That's just about the size of it." Thompson nodded his head convincingly.

"Who was this man?" Señora Guerra demanded anxiously.

"Oh, it doesn't matter," said Thompson impatiently. "I don't know what

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his real name is. But he was a friend of Lamont's the last I knew. He wasn't up here for nothing, you can lay to that. I tell you, señora, that you haven't a thing to worry about. If the girl doesn't come back to-night, she'll send word by to-morrow, anyway. She didn't have time when she left, probably. If there's no trace of her by to-morrow, an' she isn't—well, we won't cross any bridges till we come to 'em. Ask some of your people to take a look around the valley. I can't call on the bunch in here because they're not your kind. But you're foolish to worry."

"If something is wrong, the Señor Lamont will hold you to the account," said the señora grimly. "You are not the real man, Señor Thompson." She turned her horse and beckoned to her servant.

"You an' Lamont an' all your spic friends can go to heck!" snarled Thompson as he went back into his place.

Señora Guerra rode to the house of her sick friend in the Mexican quarter. From there she sent the servant with a number of messages. Soon several Mexicans were at the house and she spoke to them rapidly in Spanish. They bowed as they left hurriedly. In an hour, little more, the valley had been combed by Mexican riders for trace of the girl. But no trace had been found. Nor had she gone down the main trail, according to the lookout.

The señora picked a lean rider, noted for his reliability and horsemanship, and sent him flying out of the valley and down the main trail on a splendid mount. He was taking a message to José.

Two hours after midnight, The Weasel and Dolores reached the camp at the head of the draw on the west slope of the big mountain.

"Here we will rest, señorita," said The Weasel. "There is a balsam bed and blankets in the little tent for you. I will light a fire an' make some coffee an' look after the horses. Don't worry, for you are as safe as if you were in your cabin."

The girl dismounted and faced him. "Is he to meet me here?" she asked.

"I don't know yet," The Weasel evaded. "Perhaps he will, an' perhaps another messenger will come. We will know by daylight, I hope."

The girl seemed satisfied with his answer. She went into the tent and he gave her a candle in a miner's holder. Then he unsaddled and hobbled the horses, built a fire and put on the coffee.

Big Black Evans was watching from the shadows. The time had not come for him to appear on the scene. He would be the messenger who would arrive in the morning. In a short time The Weasel would come out to see him. Evans was impatient.

The girl came out of the tent and The Weasel looked at her and admired her beauty, which was enhanced by the flickering flames of the fire.

"In my hurry I forgot to leave any word for Señora Guerra," said the girl slowly. "She will be terribly worried. I shall have to get word to her some way that I'm all right. This I will have to do."

"I'll attend to it," The Weasel promised, his eyes glowing. "Don't worry about that. Don't worry about anything, señorita. Leave everything to me, for I know just what to do. The señora may know even now!"

Dolores' eyes clouded a bit. "I don't see any reason for all this secrecy," she declared irritably. "Señor Lamont surely doesn't think I am a child."

The Weasel shrugged. He was alert to the fact that the first faint flicker of suspicion had been born in the girl's mind. This would not do. "The señor did not have time to tell me all his plans," he explained earnestly. "I am doin' just what he told me to do. What

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else he is doin' I don't know." He held out his hands, palms upward, in a gesture of innocent helplessness.

"Very well," said Dolores, her eyes clearing. "I trust you."

The Weasel's eyes glowed again as the girl returned to the tent. He heard a faint hiss from the shadows. It was a signal from Evans. The Weasel's eyes snapped as he looked in the direction from which it had come and he shook his head. This indicated that the time for their conference would not come until Dolores had been served her coffee and biscuits.

Blackie Evans withdrew down the draw. There he paced back and forth, his face black as a thundercloud, his eyes narrowed. He had not liked the way The Weasel had looked at Dolores; nor had he liked the way the small man had looked when he had peered toward him in the shadows He swore softly but fervently. Here was a fresh and more dangerous problem; for The Weasel's heart and hopeless desire might betray him.

In the cold, white rays of moonlight Black Evans drew his guns and fondled them idly in his big hands.

He heard The Weasel calling softly to Dolores and hurried up to where he could maintain a vigil over them. He noted The Weasel's look as he gave the girl her coffee and biscuits, and black death came into his heart.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A DEAL IS MADE.

AS it happened, Sheriff John Mack and Alex Lamont were unable to start for Kerrville the night after the departure of the posse, as the sheriff had intended. Just at supper time a rider galloped into town on a spent horse with news of a shooting on a ranch thirty miles distant in the northeastern corner of the county. He did not bring many details, but such as he could furnish were sufficient to convince the official that he had to go out there and, consequently, his trip with Lamont would have to be postponed.

"Why couldn't I go alone?" Lamont suggested when he learned the news. "After all, my first business is with Big Mike, an' I've no doubts as to how that's going to turn out. As for the other, I can put it up to the authorities straight an' they can take it or leave it—my proposition, I mean—just as they see fit."

The sheriff shook his head. "Wouldn't be a go," he said. "You've got to be backed up in this because it's your final —final chance, you might say. That country down there is boiling over. You haven't got just the authorities to deal with; you've got a bunch of n'er-do-wells an' tinhorns who're afraid of you, against you—ready to knife you in the back—and a crowd of business men an' such who're just plain scared to know you're at large. It isn't going to be as easy as you think down there. If you went alone there'd be sure to be shooting, an' you'd be worse off than ever. You've got too much at stake an' I'm too interested myself for you to gum things up. No, we've got to wait a day or so, an' that's final. Remember, you came to me, an' I've got some rights in this matter."

Lamont saw the logic in this and agreed. He remained in town that night, spending most of his time at the card tables in the company of two or three men whom he knew well and whom he could trust. If he was cognizant of the many surreptitious glances directed at him, he did not show it. In fact, there was considerable excitement in Bayneville over his presence. His recent outbreak at his old game was known to all. There were many surmises as to his presence in town, but it was chiefly accepted that he had sought and found sanctuary in the county to which he had promised immunity so far

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as future depredations were concerned. Still, there were those who gladly would have turned him in for the reward money, who would have tried to capture him and spirit him away if they had dared. It was a peculiar situation, but one which the more important and influential citizens understood thoroughly. Sheriff John Mack had seen to that.

The sheriff returned too late, and too tired, next day to start that evening and so they were delayed until the following night. It was this delay which enabled Blackie Evans and The Weasel to get a good start on their roundabout ride and put their plans into operation before Lamont could possibly get word of what was going on.

John Mack and Lamont rode only at night during their journey to Kerrville. They pushed their horses fast, however, and before dawn of the third day were on the road leading up into the Wizards to the canyon where Kerrville was situated. They had discussed their plan at length and Sheriff Adams of Kerr County knew they were coming. John Mack's influence extended far beyond the borders of his own domain. It extended even to the State capitol.

"We'll fix this thing if I have to go to the governor!" he had declared with heat.

As they neared Kerrville, Lamont became dubious as to the policy of his move. "Don't it look as if I was actually hiding behind you, sheriff?" he complained.

"I sent for you hoping to bring this very thing about," Mack retorted. "You're not hiding behind anybody, an' they'll all know that. You don't have to, an' they all know that, too. Just bear in mind that I'm responsible for this. If everything goes as I sure think it will, it'll be a feather in my cap, so don't worry."

"I'd like to bust into Big Mike's office an' make him put the money back in the safe where he took it from," said Lamont grimly. "An' at the point of the gun, at that!"

"Wouldn't do," said the sheriff. "An' you haven't exactly got the right to take fool chances, now that you're pledged to a woman."

Lamont scowled. Again that tinge of resentment. His hands were tied in more ways than one; his liberty restricted. This business in hand was more or less humiliating, and it had been brought about by his engagement. Away from the girl, back in the environment where he had pulled such a neat job, he wondered if it all was worth it. Then—Dolores worth it? He smiled and his resentment was gone. Although he did not know it, this disconcerting feeling had come and gone for the last time. Henceforth, he was to be satisfied with his lot. But his satisfaction was to be made complete in a way which he did not dream. It was to be secured and cemented in pistol smoke and hot lead—in the tumult of battle.

It was still dark when they entered the mining town. Even at that hour, yellow lamplight streamed from the windows of cafés and resorts. They moved in behind the buildings on the left side of the main street and proceeded halfway up the street until they came to a whitewashed log cabin. Here they dismounted and Mack rapped on the door. After a spell it was opened part way. A tall man looked out and then spoke to Mack in an undertone. He closed the door and Mack motioned to Lamont to bring his horse. They led their mounts around the cabin to a small barn. Then they went to the rear door of the cabin, Lamont noting carefully every detail of his surroundings.

They were admitted at once and passed through the kitchen and small dining room to the front room which appeared to be a combination living room and office. The tall man who had let them in stood by the table. Lamont

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took in his appearance at a glance; iron-gray hair and mustache, firm chin, tanned skin, keen, gray eyes, powerfully built.

"This is Sheriff Adams, Lamont," said John Mack by way of introduction.

"Howdy," said Lamont shortly, without offering his hand.

"Pleased to meet you," said Sheriff Adams in a deep bass, "an' I don't mean it as a mere formal way of acknowledging the introduction, either."

Lamont bristled instantly. He had thought that up, this sheriff had. "I'm not here on formalities," he snapped out.

The sheriff was studying him intently. It was the first time they had met. Adams appeared to be a sterner man, more dignified than John Mack; but that did not mean that he was a more able officer.

"Now you two can talk a little more amiable, I reckon," said Mack. "We'll let the formalities go, Adams, if there are any, an' I don't see why there should be. Suppose we sit down."

"Good idea," Adams agreed, motioning them to chairs. He sat at the desk. "You're giving yourself up?" He addressed the question to Lamont.

"Technically, yes," replied Lamont. "But that's all."

Adams turned on John Mack. "If he's not actually giving himself up, why did he come here?" he demanded.

"I brought him here, as you know," said Mack, showing a trace of irritation himself. "Don't you think we better settle up the money end of it first? Whatever else Lamont is doing, he's returning the Green Parrot plunder." He tossed a saddlebag on the desk.

Sheriff Adams rose and went into another room for a few moments. They heard the murmur of voices and then Adams returned. "I've sent for Big Mike," he said laconically.

"An' let the whole town know Lamont's here?" said Mack in surprise.

"Nobody's going to know he's here until I'm ready for them to know it," said Adams curtly. "Big Mike won't know why he's been sent for, but he'll come pronto." He resumed his study of Lamont, subjecting him to a scrutiny which Lamont resented.

"Reckon you'll know me next time you see me?" he inquired.

"I'll know you for some time," Adams flared; "an' right here in the Kerrville jail!"

"Yeah?" There was a hint of a sneer in Lamont's tone. "We'll leave the jail talk out of it, sheriff," he said coldly, "because you're not goin' to know me in your jail, or any other, understand?"

"What's going to stop me?" smiled Adams.

"These—if nothing else!" Lamont's guns had seemed to leap from their holsters into his hands. They were trained on Adams in the wink of an eyelid. "I'm not goin' to jail, sheriff," Lamont continued sternly. "It wasn't in the contract. I went to John Mack about this business because he is my friend. He understands. He brought me here, as he told you. If you don't want to talk sensibly, I'll get out! An' if I start, you an' your men, an' all the people in Kerrville, can't stop me! If you think I'm fooling, try one smart trick—just one!"

Adams had been inclined to laugh at first, but now his face was grave. In the cold, hard, menacing eyes, the pressed lips, the antagonism which radiated from this man's personality, he recognized the dreaded Lamont; the Lamont about whom he had heard so much; the Lamont who was feared the length and breadth of the desert country.

He turned again to John Mack. "What kind of a play is this?" he asked in an uncertain tone.

Mack shrugged. "I told you why I was bringing Lamont," he said. "I understood you were willing to talk, or I wouldn't have come, nor would he have

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come. I wouldn't have permitted him to come unless I had been reasonably sure he would get a square deal. An' if it does come to jail talk, you'll just remember he's my prisoner, Adams." Mack spoke quietly, but his words carried a force which was not lost on Adams.

At this moment there came a knock on the front door. "Let one man in an' one only," came the command from Lamont, whose guns shot back into their holsters like magic.

Adams stepped to the door. A few words were spoken in an undertone and then he admitted one man. Big Mike stopped dead still and stared at Lamont in the lamplight. He noted the saddlebag on the desk and his eyes glistened brightly.

"Why—you've got him!" he exclaimed, looking wonderingly at both the officials. "Got him cold an' with the goods!"

"Oh, shut up an' sit down, you fat-faced dolt!" said Lamont in disgust. "Maybe these men have got something to say to you. An' don't get it into your head that anybody's got me or you're likely to stub your toe again." He frowned heavily at the resort keeper.

"Maybe you better sit down," John Mack suggested; "an' Adams, maybe you better let me talk to Big Mike."

"Go ahead," said Adams, resuming his chair and taking out a box of cigars from a drawer of his desk. John Mack accepted one as Big Mike sat down gingerly.

"It's like this, Mike," said Mack, making sure of his light; "Lamont is returning your money of his own accord. It's all there. He hasn't even counted it, an' I've merely looked in the bag. You can count it for yourself to make sure the amount is intact."

Big Mike looked stupidly at the speaker and Lamont. Then he rose, took up the saddlebag and dumped the contents on the table. He did not count the amount of money, but he went hastily through the packs of bills. "I guess it's all there, all right," he said when he had finished. He stuffed the bills back into the saddlebag and his eyes were lighted with satisfaction. "I'm much obliged," he said facetiously to Lamont.

"Oh, don't thank me," returned Lamont dryly. "I had mighty good reason or you'd never have seen a dollar of it again."

"Now, Mike, let's get this thing straight," said John Mack. "I sent a messenger to scour the country an' tell Lamont I wanted to see him. I'm his friend, understand. He came to me before my messenger could reach him, an' turned that money over to me for you, unconditionally, of his own free will. Let that sink in a minute."

Mack puffed thoughtfully on his cigar, looking at Big Mike, whose eyes were wide with astonishment.

"Now, let's go on," Mack resumed. "You'll remember that on the night of the robbery you made certain broad statements as to what you would do if any man tried to hold you up single-handed." He saw Big Mike flush at this. "An' you joked about stealing by means of your gambling games in plain sight, but the suckers couldn't see how it was done." Big Mike's flush deepened and Adams took note of this.

"Now that's only part of what you said, Mike," John Mack went on, "an' you sort of hit Lamont's professional pride an' he decided to teach you a lesson. He didn't go into your place to rob it, but to gamble. You egged him on. You're as much to blame as he is, in my estimation. Anyway, that isn't the point. The point is this: Lamont is returning your money of his own free will for a reason of his own. He was out of the game for a long time, as you know. Now he's going out of it for good. I took his word once an' he kept it. I'm taking it again, an' I'll bet my

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last dollar he'll keep it again. Are you —now *I'm* asking this, not him—are you willing to take back your money an' let things ride? Forget about it entirely?"

The silence weighed heavily in the room. All eyes were fixed on Big Mike, and Big Mike's eyes were fixed on Lamont.

"Is this true?" he asked.

"Mack isn't in the habit of lying," replied Lamont in a drawl.

Big Mike turned to John Mack. "All right," he said. "It's all jake with me. Can't understand it, exactly, but I'm not hurt—now—an' I'm willin' to forget it. I can say Lamont was playin' a joke on me."

"That's up to you," nodded Mack. "An' I'm much obliged to you, Mike. An' this lets you out of it. Take your money an' don't say anything to anybody just yet about Lamont being here."

"Fair enough," said Big Mike heartily, and seeing his presence was no longer required he rose and took up the saddlebag. "I'll return the bag," he said to Lamont.

"Keep it," drawled Lamont. "Hang it over the safe for a souvenir an' to remind you that you've really made a promise."

"Now that that's settled," said Adams, as Big Mike left, "what's the next step?" He spoke to John Mack.

"It is now a question of your attitude," said Mack. "This job was pulled off in your county. Lamont promised me long ago to lay off mine, an' he saved me the lives of six good men an' kept his promise. How do you look at this business?"

Sheriff Adams shifted uneasily in his chair. "How can I look at it?" he countered. "This man comes here and pulls off a big robbery. The mining officials and merchants and bankers of the town are riding my neck. They're afraid of him an' they want him locked up. It isn't just me. I know about the deal you made with him, but I don't know if I could make the same kind of a deal if I wanted to. At that, he'd probably break out in another county and then I'd have some other sheriff down on me like a ton of lead and there'd be the dickens to pay, with me the goat. Of course, after what he has done to-night, I can get him a light sentence, and——"

He was interrupted by Lamont's laugh.

"But listen, Adams," said John Mack, "he isn't making a deal for your county; he's making a deal for all counties, for the State, for all the States. He's quitting for good, an' I'm giving my own personal word for it an' I'll stand responsible."

Sheriff Adams was frowning. "Sounds good," he said doubtfully, glancing at Lamont. "But there must be something behind all this."

"That's just it," said John Mack eagerly. "There is something behind it. Lamont has the finest reason, the finest incentive in the world to set him straight an' keep him straight."

"I don't believe I'd tell him about that," Lamont demurred.

"I'll have to," Mack protested. "Adams must know the whole story. He's entitled to know, considering the favor we are asking of him. I'll have to——"

He was interrupted by the sound of many voices outside. A crowd was congregating in front of the cabin. Both Mack and Adams rushed to the door, and as they appeared a hoarse cry went up. Two score men were there in the graying dawn. Others were running from the street.

"Where's Lamont?" a voice shouted.

Sheriff Adams swore and stepped outside to confront the angry throng. John Mack turned back into the room, but stopped short. A draft of air was blowing through the place. Lamont was gone!

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CHAPTER XXIX.

LAMONT LEARNS.

THROUGH the cabin and out the rear door ran John Mack. He saw the barn door open, knew Lamont was getting his horse. He met him in the front of the barn as he was leading out his mount.

"This is no time to run," he said. "Wait until you see how Adams handles that crowd."

"I'm not worrying about the crowd," Lamont returned. "I can scatter 'em like flies. It's that Big Mike I'm thinking of. He didn't keep his word. He told 'em I was here the minute he got out—the yellow rat! I'm not goin' to kill him, don't worry; but I'm goin' to prick his ears for earrings!"

"Maybe it wasn't him," said Mack. "Listen!"

Sheriff Adams' voice carried clear on the still morning air. "There isn't going to be any mob violence in this town, an' don't you forget that," the sheriff was saying in ringing tones. "I'm the authority here, an' you're not goin' to interfere with my business. If it's a riot you want, I'll give you a riot! Sheriff Mack is here from the north. Lamont is here. I have a deputy or two at hand. I'll ask 'em all to turn their guns on you before I'll let you make serious trouble. Martin, how'd these men learn Lamont was in town?"

"That's a deputy," John Mack told Lamont in an undertone.

"Why—I—I——" The deputy faltered.

"Oh, you let the cat out of the bag, eh?" Adams thundered. "I thought you'd know enough to keep your trap closed without my having to tell you. I'll take your badge after this crowd cools."

"Wasn't Big Mike a-tall," said John Mack as Lamont nodded.

"Let's move in where we can see what's goin' on," said Lamont, and he led the way hurriedly through the house to the front door.

Meanwhile, more men had arrived on the scene and there were hostile murmurings. Most of the men were hardened miners and many of them still wore their lamps after coming off shift at midnight. The resorts were being emptied as the news of Lamont's presence in town spread. While liquor, too, was playing its part. The situation was threatening.

"Now listen, you men," Sheriff Adams cried sternly. "I'm goin' to tell you something, an' then I'm goin' to stop talking. I don't have to talk to you. I'm the sheriff of this county an' I have the law behind me, an' I have all law-abiding citizens behind me. I'm not just a man with a five-pointed star. Lamont is here in the custody of two sheriffs who're bound to protect him an' who'll permit him to protect himself if necessary." He paused to let the point sink in.

"Why ain't he in jail?" shouted a coarse voice. "Why ain't he where he belongs?"

"Who asked that question?" shouted Adams.

"I asked it," a man yelled. A big, burly form detached itself from the throng. "We got a right to know, an' you know it, too."

Adams was off the little front stoop in a single bound. His right fist shot out with the impetus of his leap and bound behind it. Every one there heard the smashing impact of that fist against the big man's jaw. He went down in a heap, and the sheriff drew back.

"That's the answer to that!" his voice rang. "I'm running my office an' I don't have to answer the questions of any bully or any mob. If there's any one here who wants a dose of the same, let him step out." There was a moment of complete silence. Then a murmur came from the crowd, but no one came forth to meet the challenge.

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Sheriff Adams stepped back to the stoop. "Now, I'll tell you what I started to tell you," he said, biting off his words sharply. "Lamont gave himself up. Understand that? He gave himself up, an' he returned the money taken from The Green Parrot of his own free will. If you don't believe it, go down to Big Mike's place an' tell him I said to show you the money!"

This statement was greeted with astonishment which showed clearly on the faces of the men in the light of the breaking day. They looked at each other, but said nothing. The sheriff saw he had his audience thinking.

"Now you see?" he went on. "Big Mike's part in this business is played out. He's all set an' satisfied an' said himself that he wasn't hurt. That lets him out clear an' clean. Now it's up to the law. That's my end, an' I can attend to my end without any help from the likes of you an' without answering a lot of fool questions or telling you my business. Now I'll tell you where you get off at."

He paused a few moments but no murmur came from the crowd. "Mack, Lamont, step out here!" he commanded. There were startled exclamations as the mob recognized Lamont, who stood before them with his hands on his two guns. "Martin, come up here," Adams commanded. The deputy mounted the stoop.

"As I said before," Adams told the crowd, "if you want a riot, I'll give you a riot; but if you don't clear out of here an' mind your own business inside of a minute, I'll close every gambling an' drinking place in this town if I have to call on the State militia!"

No one who heard Sheriff Adams and saw the fire in his eyes could doubt that he meant exactly what he said. And in threatening what they considered their sole recreation in the mining camp, he hit a vulnerable spot.

The men hesitated. Then a few started to leave. The man who had been knocked down was among these. Another few moments and the sheriff took out his watch. Then the crowd broke and surged back between the buildings to the street. The danger of violence was over.

Sheriff Adams led the way back into his living room and office. He left the door open, admitting the cool morning air, and blew out the light in the lamp, for the sun was coming up.

Lamont was looking at him with a new interest in his eyes. "You handled that situation in regular style, sheriff," he said.

"Thanks," returned Adams curtly. "I had 'em when I threatened to take their fun away from 'em. I could do it, too. An' I would—for a time. We have to overlook some things here"—he was speaking to John Mack now—"because we have to keep the men. This is getting to be a pretty important camp."

"Oh, well, I wink at a few things up my way myself," said Mack easily. "This isn't a white-ribbon country yet an' our kind of people aren't changed so easy. I have trouble enough keeping men on my ranch."

They sat down and Adams drummed his fingers on his desk. He looked first at Lamont and then at John Mack. He spoke directly to the latter. "Now, what's the proposition?" he asked.

"Complete immunity and, if necessary, protection," answered Mack. "An' that's a small return for what Lamont has done an' for the security of this an' other sections in the future."

"How do I know you're going straight?" Adams asked Lamont.

"You don't know it," Lamont replied. "You've got to take my word for it just as Mack did. I'm giving you my word."

"The word of an outlaw," Adams began, "an' a dangerous outlaw——"

"I stand behind it," John Mack interrupted. "Listen, Adams, I've

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watched this man's career. I know him better than you do; better than he himself thinks I do. He got The Buzzard for me. I suppose you heard about that. An' he refused to accept the reward because he said he didn't take blood money. Somehow, I sort of feel responsible for this outbreak of his, although Big Mike did unknowingly egg him on. But when I got him mixed up in that Buzzard business, I put the old fever into his veins. I knew he was going to hit the trail when I left Seymore. I——"

"Wait a minute!" Lamont interrupted sharply. "We didn't come here to make a lot of excuses. You wouldn't make any for yourself, an' you needn't make any for me. This is a straight business proposition, an' I'll tell you one thing, Adams: You can listen to us an' turn us down, an' you can keep on hunting me, holding the club of the law over my head, but I won't go back into the game, because I can't. I have a reason. You've either got to make a deal or kill me, because I won't be taken alive!"

He rose suddenly. "Make up your mind! I've put my cards on the table. You can draw to your hand or play it as you think best. Either way, I'm going!"

A dull flush of anger showed in Adams' face. "If you're goin' to put it that way," he said angrily, "I'll——"

"Lamont, sit down!" John Mack commanded. "It was agreed that I was to attend to this business. Now you just keep your word about that!"

Lamont scowled at him. Then: "Go ahead," he said in resignation, with a wave of his hand. "But remember what I told you about giving myself up. If there's anything in the world I don't want, it's gun play; but this man"—he pointed to Adams—"is goin' to drive me to it!"

"Nobody's going to drive you to anything," said John Mack. "That other business—you know what I mean—has warped your viewpoint an' gummed up the wheels in your head. Now keep your trap shut while I give Adams the low-down on all this. I've got as much interest in you as if you was my own son. Show a little appreciation." It was plain John Mack was getting mad.

"Now, listen to me, Adams," said Mack sternly, hitching his chair toward the Kerr County official.

Then John Mack explained his former experiences with Lamont, and stressed the affair of The Buzzard in Seymore and his own rescue from the archoutlaw by Lamont. He told of the girl. He told of the robbery in Kerrville, what incidents he believed had actuated Lamont in performing it, and went on to reveal the mission of José, the story of Dolores, Lamont's ride to Running Wells, what happened there, his leave-taking of his bride-to-be, and his appearance in Bayneville.

"Then we came here, at my suggestion," John Mack concluded. "Lamont wanted to come alone an' I wouldn't hear of it because I knew there would be trouble. Also, I thought my word an' my story would carry some weight. Now you have it, Adams, an' as Lamont said about himself, so I say about myself—my cards are on the table."

Adams had listened intently, keeping his eyes for the most part on Lamont. The latter had looked steadily out the door. He did not like the idea of any one else fighting his battles, so he considered. Of course, he was doing it for Dolores. But he rejected this thought instantly as a feeble excuse and cowardly. He almost regretted he had taken the step he had. If he could only fight this out some way!

Swift-moving footsteps sounded outside and as they turned to look, the deputy, Anderson, stamped into the room.

He glared at John Mack and Lamont, particularly the latter, who had been expecting him to show up and was ready to relish what he knew was to come.

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"I heard you was here," he said to John Mack. "An'——" He pointed a forefinger at Lamont and looked at Adams. "There's the fellow who helped him play that trick on me," he declared loudly. "I don't know what they're here for, but it's crooked work they're up to, sheriff; you can bet on that."

"Sheriff Mack brought in Lamont," said Adams dryly.

"Yes? He had him hid so he could draw down the reward!" Anderson's face was very red, mostly with anger. "I told him I didn't care about the reward. I merely wanted to bring him in, which was my right."

"Why didn't you get him when you almost had him?" asked Sheriff Adams with a show of irritation. "He was in Bayneville just like he is here."

"Where is he?" demanded Anderson.

"Sitting there in that chair," said the sheriff, pointing to the smiling Lamont.

"Him!" Anderson ejaculated scornfully. "That's the same fellow who helped that sheriff put it over on me up there!"

"You had a good description of him when you left," said Adams in an acid voice. "If you hadn't been so excited or thick-headed you'd have recognized him on sight. If you'll look at him closely now, maybe you can see where he fits the descriptions of him."

"But I—why—that sheriff had him in jail with his guns on—both of them!" stammered Anderson.

"That was to pull the wool over your eyes, I guess," said Adams. "Lamont had given himself up to Mack, an' Mack didn't intend to let you or any one else have him."

"I told you he was Lamont," said John Mack mildly. "You wouldn't have it that way. Don't know as I blame you much, the way we handled things. But you needn't feel too put out, for you'd never have taken him out of Bayneville, an' your chief will tell you so."

Anderson's face flushed now with chagrin. "Are you goin' to let him get away with this?" he asked angrily, speaking to Adams.

Adams shrugged. "You let him get away with it," he said curtly. "What do you expect me to do? I can't be directing affairs from my office an' going out with all my posses, too. I'm not holding it up against you, Anderson. Mack was too slick for you, that's all; maybe he's too slick for both of us. I guess you better leave so we can finish our business in here." He looked pointedly at John Mack, who frowned.

"You ought to know better than to send an inexperienced youngster like that out with a posse," said Mack as Anderson left, fighting mad.

"He knows the country," Adams answered shortly; "but I reckon that's about all."

"I see," said Mack. "You had to have a man who knew the country. Couldn't help yourself." There was a hint of sarcasm in his tone. It might be that he suspected that there were political motives behind many of Adams' moves. "Well, let's get back to the business in hand."

Adams cleared his throat. "This is putting it up to me straight," he said to John Mack. "It's—well, it's the first time in my experience I've run up against a proposition like this. I told you over the phone I was ready to talk, but I made no promises, I——"

"I didn't ask for any," John Mack cut in.

"——don't see just where I have the authority to let this man go," finished Adams.

"You haven't got him yet," Mack pointed out. "An' if I had the authority to make a deal with Lamont for what I considered were the best interests of my county, you have the same authority."

Adams' doubt was clearly reflected in his face. Moreover, it was apparent he

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was sincere in all he said. He shook his head. "An' what'll happen if I can't see my way clear to enter into such an arrangement?" he inquired, and then realized it was a somewhat silly question on his part and showed weakness.

"Then I'll go to the governor!" thundered John Mack.

"That's a threat!" exclaimed Adams.

"It shows I mean business, that's what it shows," Mack declared.

"I'll have to have time to think this over an' maybe to talk with one or two people," said Adams. "Meanwhile——" He looked at Lamont dubiously.

Lamont chuckled. "You're wondering about me?" he said. "Oh, I'll look after myself, sheriff. I've had to do that since I was a kid, knee-high, you might say. I've had to look sharp at times, an' I can look sharp again." He smiled confidently.

In the silence that followed they heard the stamp of boots and the clink of spurs on the steps and stoop. Then a figure appeared in the doorway. It was a Mexican, and he removed his sombrero quickly as he eyed the trio in the room.

"What is it?" demanded Adams.

"I hear—I come to see the Señor Lamont," the Mexican announced. "I hear he is here so I come."

"Come in," Lamont invited. "What do you want to see me about?"

"Eet is for jus' you, señor, I bring the message," said the Mexican, glancing at the other two men as he stepped across the threshold.

"Oh, I've no private affairs now," said Lamont irritably, "except personal matters. Speak up an' tell your message. I'd just as soon these men would hear, no matter who it's from."

The Mexican bobbed his head in acquiescence. "Eet is from José, señor," he said. "Eet is about the señorita."

Lamont started, leaped to his feet, and grasped the messenger by the arm. "Dolores?" he cried. "What is it? Has anything happened to her?"

"She is gone!" blurted the Mexican.

"Gone?" Lamont's face went white under its tan. "Gone where? When? Speak up, can't you?"

"Nobody know where she go," was the answer. "She disappear three nights ago. The señora send for José an' he no know where she go. He send men everywhere to look for you. I keel one horse to get here fast. The others go other places, for José no know where you can be and he jus' send everywhere to take the chance somebody find you. He want you to come queek, señor."

Lamont released him. He turned to the two sheriffs, his face drawn into stern lines, his lids narrowed, his eyes flashing ominously.

"You heard the message," he said, the words coming through his teeth. "Dolores has disappeared. Something is wrong. I'm going to look for her, an' I'm going now! This deal, if it is a deal, or if it's going to be, can wait!"

He swung on his heel and hurried out the rear way.

"An' I'm going with him," said John Mack to Adams. "He may need me to keep your bloodhounds off."

Then John Mack, too, strode out.

Sheriff Adams rose quickly and motioned to the Mexican. "Where'd you come from?" he demanded.

"From Seymour, señor," replied the trembling Mexican.

Adams waved him out and called for Martin. "I'm not taking your badge," he said crisply, "because in the future I think you'll know enough to keep your mouth closed about office business. I want twenty good riders, on pay. Most of the men are back. Pick a score I can depend upon. I want 'em ready for the trail in an hour. Go get 'em."

The pound of galloping hoofs came to Adams' ears as Martin hurried out to obey his orders.

To be concluded in next week's issue of WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE.

WS—5F

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Get Ready To Ride

By E. C. Lincoln

Author of "Yours—If You Ride Him," etc.

ATCH chute No. 3, folks! Watch chute No. 3, now! Pete Donne comin' out on a wild steer!"

It was mid-afternoon on the second day of the Blaine City Round-up. The brass band in the stands crashed on with renewed vigor. Multi-colored pennons snapped in the fresh western breeze. Riders scurried hither and yon about the dusty oval of the arena. Ten thousand rabid rodeo fans, gathered from half the State of Montana by the thrill of the game they loved best—cow country on a holiday—leaned forward in their seats, tense, expectant.

So Pete Donne emerged with a whoop and yell and flash of spurs, and Pete Donne, out of luck, hit the dust in a whirling pin wheel of yellow shirt and flapping chaps before the bawling, white-eyed steer had made six jumps. The indignant animal streaked away for the distant east gate. Pete picked himself up, limping. The crowd in the stands roared their delight.

But one Joe Pedley, the "Chuckawalla Kid," leaned morosely against the rough timbers of a vacant chute, deaf to the laughter, blind to the color and movement, and sparkling life that milled about him, busy with his own thoughts. Passing acquaintances, hurrying from corral to starting line, looked at him, started to speak, and went on their way with muttered words of doubt, respecting the boy's silence. For was he not the "Chuckawalla Kid," prince among riders, second only to "Curly" Johnson himself? The trouble between the

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Kid and Curly was a private affair; best keep out. When the Kid looked like that, cold-eyed and sullen, you could bet your neck he was thinking about Curly.

And now Joe Pedley ground his spurred heel on the lowest plank of the empty chute and gazed unseeing at the distant blue hills, while his heart welled over with the bitterness of his hate.

For three years he had worked toward his goal. It had been fun, at first. His father, and the motley crew of riders who were his friends on the Z Seven, had been proud of him, encouraged him to go into faster company than the local rodeos could offer. He remembered yet the thrill of bringing home the silver-mounted prize saddle from the Bozeman show that year. He had ridden joyously then, tackling the worst mounts the West could produce for the sheer excitement of the battle. But the virus of ambition had entered his blood, and he had persuaded his father—who badly needed him at home—to give him a last chance to increase a reputation already state-wide.

Before a month had passed, eighteen-year-old Joe Pedley—christened the Chuckawalla Kid by the delighted fans—had set his heart on the championship. More than love, or wealth, or broad lands, or many cattle, he coveted that little silver statue of a fighting bronc horse and his rider which bears the inscription denoting the bronc-riding championship of the West. He had missed it, that year, by four points.

He was good. He proved it by taking second money at the Salinas show; then again at Cheyenne, at Miles City, at Blaine, at Pendleton. But though he led his field easily, the rider who invariably outscored him in the judges' figures by the narrowest of margins, adding up the count in contest after contest, was Curly Johnson, three times national champion, and now in his fourth season.

This summer, Joe knew, was his last chance to beat Curly. Conditions on the Z Seven made it imperative that a younger hand should take the reins there.

From the earliest of the May contests ill luck had dogged him close, little accidents which he could blame on nobody in particular. At the Baker show, a broken spur strap; at San José, a handful of dust, filling his eyes as he left the chute on the day of the finals; at Phoenix, a carelessly opened gate which let in a herd of steers and distracted the attention of the judges in the midst of his ride. It seemed to the boy that these things came with too great frequency to be wholly the result of chance. He felt certain that Curly Johnson had turned to dirty work in defense of his throne.

For he knew that Curly was afraid. The Chuckawalla Kid, as good a judge of men as of horses, despite his years, detected in the bearing of the champion sure signs that the man was slipping, and knew it. More than once, in the last few contests, the boy had seen him wince at the pounding of a mean horse. And of late Curly had taken to a line of conduct deliberately calculated to get his goat; to growling sarcastic jests through tight lips as the two met in the crowd; to standing by the gate, with a laughing sneer in his steel-gray eyes, whenever Joe was getting ready to ride.

It had worked, Joe acknowledged to himself. When he left the chute, now, he was seeing red, nerves hard and tense with repressed rage. This very morning he had rolled from his blankets with a strong hunch that the day would bring disaster.

Therefore, the Chuckawalla Kid herded grimly by his lonesome on this second afternoon of the Blaine City Round-up, waiting dumbly till his number should be called. To look at, he was a splendid specimen of rangeland youth—yellow jersey, with his number, 61, pinned on the back, drawn tight over

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muscles like a panther's, worn chaps thrown across his shoulder, peaked hat pulled low over a leather-brown face, clean, and manly, and fine. But confusion reigned within him.

Riders loping by so close that their chaps almost touched his elbow meant nothing to him. Only when a shadow fell at his feet, and a cold, level voice addressed the boy by name, did he come out of his bitter reverie. Then he returned to earth with a jolt, and the hot blood mounted prickling to his young face, and his hands trembled with the desire to kill.

For the man who slouched gracefully before him, tantalizing him with word and easy carriage of superiority, was Curly Johnson himself, Rosie O'Day, the relay rider, clinging to his arm.

"Feelin' sick, Kid?" he taunted. "Sorta scairt o' that Moonshine hawse yuh drawed? Ne' mind, Kid. Come an' see me ride the Gray Wolf. Mebbe yuh'll learn somethin' if yuh watch right close."

Joe Pedley's fingers clenched deep in the palms of his hands. Outwardly he was cool and collected, but his pulses beat with great hammer strokes as he studied his tormentor. He appraised the strength of those broad shoulders that stretched the scarlet rodeo shirt almost to bursting, the deeply graven lines of experience on the rugged face; and he saw, or thought he saw, a tiny flicker of the eye which confirmed his opinion that the champion's own nerves were cracking.

The boy managed a convincing grin. "Sure, I'm a-comin'," he answered quickly. "Some day you're a-goin' t' git throwed, Curly, an' I sure don't want t' miss the sight of it. Wanter see what a champ looks like, when he's messin' up the ground. Be heap plenty fun, won't it, Rosie?" And though the elder man laughed as he turned away, the flare of crimson in his face showed Joe Pedley that his shot had told.

He watched the two drift on toward the chute where a white-faced bay kicked continuously, a bit resentful that a girl like Rosie O'Day should spend her time on a guy like Curly. He'd heard they were to be married soon, that Rosie had been pleading with Curly for two years to give up the riding game and settle down to the cow business.

For the first time in an hour he heard the music of the band, and suddenly the whole colorful spectacle of the arena came alive before him: Gay shirts, hurrying men, the bull-throated roar of the announcer, and "Uncle Dan" Meyers, the gray-bearded arena director, loping about on his gaunt sorrel. Joe Pedley drew a long breath, and joined the group of waiting contestants clustered about the gear box.

They saw his grin, and they made way for him with words of rough welcome:

"How's the ol' Kid, huh?" they greeted. "Goin' t' ketch that Johnson feller t'-day?"

"Sure aim that a way."

"'At-a-stuff, big boy! Git after the champ, Kid. Yuh oughta cop the breaks 'most any time now."

The boy appreciated their friendship. He knew they sensed that the real contest was between himself and the champion, and their recognition cheered him.

"Let's go see Curly make his ride," he suggested. "Ain't that his number they're callin' now?"

He was right. High above the crash of the band came the voice: "No. 18 next! Take a look at yo' program, ladies an' gents. No. 18—Curly Johnson in person—three years world's champeen buckin'-hawse rider—comin' out o' chute five on that famous outlaw, Gray Wolf. Watch Curly ride, folks! 'N' come back t'-morrow t' see him win the finals. He's a-comin' out!"

From the stands sounded a burst of applause, checked to expectant silence.

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In the arena there was a sudden gathering of men about the timber gate of chute five. Joe Pedley, hurrying to get near, saw Rosie O'Day standing by a heap of associated saddles, her fingers twisting nervously.

"Here he comes!"

A clatter of hoofs against timber, shouts and scurryings of helpers, then a great gray stallion shot grunting into the dust and sunlight. Up he went, reaching for the stars, then down and away, every ounce of viciousness, pent up for twenty-four hours, blazing out for the minute of battle.

The boy saw with reluctant admiration that Curly Johnson, great hat swinging, silk shirt snapping in the wind, spurs raking in regular rhythm, was making a man-sized ride of it. Fence-corner, sunfish, bone-cracking crow hop—the Gray Wolf horse was showing his best.

Then Joe gasped. He looked quickly at the eager riders clustered about him. Others had seen it, too. The judges could not have missed it; that fraction of a second during which Curly had locked his spur in the cinch, saving himself when the gray swapped ends.

What matter if the stands roared their applause? It wasn't the stands that kept the score. With any luck at all, he'd outpoint Curly to-day. Curly was slipping. To-morrow could take care of itself.

He took care to meet his enemy when the champion, bowing, waddled in from the arena. He had not been mistaken; Curly's face was angry. It made Joe smile when the elder man addressed him through lips that were straight and hard:

"How'd yuh like it, Kid? Kin yuh beat that, huh?"

"Yeh," said Joe. "Come 'n' see me do it!" and he turned away without a backward glance.

Twenty minutes more, twenty minutes of nervous waiting, during which the boy sought distraction in watching his second-rate opponents. Nothing to worry over, there. He saw "Slim" Duval take his bumps from a new little horse from the South. "Spud" Blake did better on old Coyote; but Coyote wasn't bucking up to the form of two years back. Then he heard his own number shouted, and he elbowed his way to chute three, where the crowd was already collecting.

Leisurely he hauled on the worn chaps, tested his spurs, cinched up his belt a hole. In the chute the wiry black mare, Moonshine, was making trouble for the helpers, lunging from side to side in her eagerness to start the fight.

"Red" Parker came past him, a saddle perched on his shoulder. "I'm a-puttin' on that hull with the hide scratched offn the roll, Kid. That's all right with you, ain't it?" Red asked.

The boy nodded cheerfully. He remembered seeing Curly use that saddle. Perhaps it would bring him luck.

"No. 61 next, folks! The Chuckawalla Kid, runner-up to Curly Johnson fer the world's champeenship las' year. He's a-comin' out chute three, on Moonshine!" The announcer was watching.

They called to him to hurry, but he was too experienced in the game to let that worry him. Deliberately he climbed the side of the chute, paused a moment to run his eyes over the expectant crowd, then lowered himself to test his rigging. He took up the cinch the width of two fingers, and tried the stirrup leathers. When the sweat-streaked mare had settled down once more, he straddled the narrow pen, then gently eased his weight into the saddle. Through the bars of the gate he saw Curly watching him. For an instant his eyes filled with a red mist; then he steeled himself to the task in hand.

He caught up the halter rope, and leaned forward, setting his spurs high against the black shoulders.

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"Let 'er buck!"

With a rush that almost snapped the boy's neck the black mare went looking for trouble. In the reeling, bone-crushing torment of the first few seconds, Joe Pedley's mind went blank. Only the instinct of long training kept his spurred heels playing steadily, his black hat waving defiance, while his body yielded to the storm. All about him the world circled in swimming ribbons of light. His muscles ached with the torture. Yet he knew, deep within him, that he was giving Moonshine the ride of her eventful life.

Seven seconds gone!

Joe Pedley heard a sharp, thin sound like the crack of a pistol. The terrible jarring ceased. He was floating comfortably, somewhere, with the brown earth far below him. Then something crashed, and a flare like a thousand suns burned high, then turned to blackness.

When he sat up, hazers and judges were racing toward him. He shook his head to clear his sight, grunting, wriggled, and looked about.

Moonshine, still bucking, was circling the arena. Twenty feet away lay the saddle, a broken-off latigo bearing evidence to what had happened. The Chuckawalla Kid climbed to his feet, shifted drunkenly, and staggered over to inspect it. For a full minute he studied the torn leather carefully; then, with an oath of disgust he held it up that the judges might see for themselves. For the latigo had been cut on the inside surface with a sharp knife, cut almost, but not quite, through, leaving just enough leather to hold the strain of a tightened cinch. Only by a miracle could it have held while the mare made three jumps.

"Take a look, will yuh? There's the evidence," said Joe Pedley, forcing his anger within the bounds of coherent speech. "How about it?"

"Spike" Connor, the head judge, looked, and he spoke his mind. "You gits a reride, Kid," he promised. "Dirty work, for certain. Now you go over under the stands 'n' take it easy till we calls yuh ag'in. We aims t' give everybody a square deal at this show, boy."

Though the crowd cheered encouragement as Joe passed, it was small comfort to him. Shaken by the fall, only one thought came clearly; Curly Johnson had done it! He set his teeth hard, as he stretched his aching body in the cool shadows, trying to earn every possible second of rest, and defeating his purpose by his very determination. Once the reride was over, he knew exactly what he would do.

He left the chute for the second try still so shaken that he failed to do himself justice. The crowd could find no fault; the Chuckawalla Kid rode clean, and he rode straight up, but the judges saw him take a pounding like the veriest beginner. When he dismounted at the whistle he wasted no time. He went looking for Curly Johnson.

He found him among the knot of hazers and waiting contestants by the starting line of the relay. On Curly's face was a grin of triumph. The Chuckawalla Kid pushed men from his path with scant courtesy till he stood confronting the champion, chest to chest.

"You cut my cinch!" grated the boy. "I sure hate t' soil my hands on a polecat like you, but——"

His right fist hooked upward, smacked full against the champion's bony jaw with a crack that was heard through the crowded stands.

Curly Johnson dropped, then leaped to his feet and came in slugging. There was a quick rush of men, a sudden gasp from stands above; then the age-old mob yell that brings every man out of his seat, nerves tingling:

"Fight! Fight!"

In the arena, cooler-headed ones

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threw long arms about the crazed boy, dragging him off. Curly Johnson, too, was struggling with friends that held him back. Into that maelstrom of colored shirts, boiling by the chutes, plunged the arena director, Uncle Dan Meyers, on his rawboned sorrel, his white beard bristling with anger.

"Hey! What's the matter here?" he bellowed. "You, Joe—Curly—— Want the folks t' think we're a bunch o' roughnecks? This here's a rodeo, not a prize fight. Take 'em under the grand stand, boys—in the office. You, 'Shorty'; run the show while I'm gone. We'll see about this!"

Jostled, pulled about, his arms pinned behind him, despite his struggles, Joe Pedley was led into the dusty room where the business of the rodeo was conducted. Overhead sounded the restless feet of the crowd, like the roar of a distant sea. Here, for the moment, was silence, save for the gasping breath of the two enemies, eager as pit bulls to fly at each other's throats.

Uncle Dan seated himself behind a long board table, glaring at the belligerents impartially. He beckoned to the cashier, counting the day's receipts at the ticket window, and when that worthy handed over the six-gun strapped to his thigh he placed it conspicuously before him on the table. "Now," said Uncle Dan to the company in general, "you fellers kin turn them fightin' cocks loose. The one of 'em that makes a break 'll git perforated. You know me. Now you first, Joe. Who started this?"

The boy straightened his broad shoulders. "I did, Uncle Dan," he confessed.

"Why?"

"You know, well enough. You know why the judges give me a ride. My cinch was cut. Curly Johnson did it."

There was a murmur of anger from the champion's supporters. Uncle Dan raised a gnarled forefinger, and the protest ceased. "Did yuh do that, Curly?" he asked.

The sneer on the champion's hard mouth deepened. "He says so," he replied levelly. "Let's see him prove it. Uncle Dan, that guy hit me. It's between the two of us. Either him or me is out o' them finals right now. We're goin' to fight, guns or fists, 'n' there can't nobody stop us!"

The room was quiet, then, till the gray old arena director gave his judgment: "I reckon that's right," he acknowledged. "We'll look into this cinch business later. Will yuh fight him, Joe?"

The boy nodded.

"Then it's a go," declared Uncle Dan. "But we won't have no barroom row outen this. You fellers'll fight to-night, after supper, in stable twenty. Bare knuckles, to a finish. Loser drops outen the finals. An' if one of you jaspers so much as bats an eye at t'other afore the time comes, you'll settle with me, pussonal. Now git to thunder outen here!"

From mouth to mouth the news spread through the rodeo grounds with the speed of a prairie fire.

"Heard it?"

"Heard what?"

"Curly Johnson 'n' the Chuckawalla Kid. Joe says Curly cut his cinch. Goin' t' fight t'-night in stable twenty!"

"Yeh?"

"Yeh. Yuh dumb goats! Fists, I tell yuh—bare knuckles! Boy, that'll be a scrap. Be there?"

"Bare knuckles? Sure am! Say, I got twenty dollars that says Curly licks him."

Time passed slowly for Joe Pedley, alone in his bleak quarters at the Diamond Rooming House. He lay on the rumpled bed, his mind a turmoil of doubt, and wrath, and eager hatred, counting the minutes as the hand of his watch made its slow journey around the face. He shut his eyes, trying to sleep.

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When he opened them again, barely five minutes had gone by. He felt no appetite for supper. At last he could wait no longer, and he started for the rodeo grounds with the early shadows of twilight.

Men spoke to him as he went in through the open gates, but he gave no heed. Down the long line of buildings he made his way, to the very end of the line, close to the west fence, where the dark bulk of stable twenty loomed before him. It was here, so far from water that the frame structure was seldom used except as a storage shed for grain and hay, that certain riders and rodeo help met for the nightly crap game, secure from the interference of tolerant police. Even now narrow lines of light marked the cracks in the rough walls.

Joe pulled open the doors, entered, and stood blinking in the sudden glare. In the blinding light from a dozen gasoline lanterns, hung from rafters and stall posts, he saw that the place was crowded to the roof with men—men perched precariously on two-by-fours; men hunched on the bales of alfalfa piled high against the walls; men packed as close as they could stand about an open space where the light was brightest.

The growling murmur of many voices stilled as a hundred faces turned toward him; then the mass parted, leaving a narrow passage through which he forced his way. He passed the front rank, squatted on their haunches, and stared at the hard-packed dirt floor of a makeshift ring.

From his favored seat on a box in one corner Uncle Dan Meyers came forward to greet him, the lust of battle in his old gray eyes, the hush of eager anticipation in his throaty voice.

"Yuh still got fifteen minutes," he whispered. "Curly ain't here yet. Looks like the boys was right interested, don't it? Most of 'em was here when I come. Better sit down while yuh're waitin'."

Time passed quickly now. The boy looked up, almost unbelieving, when his enemy pushed out from the crowd into the light. At the sight of that hard, straight mouth and sneering smile his anger flamed anew within him.

There was little delay. "Gents, I'm a-runnin' this fight," announced Uncle Dan in a voice that brought respectful silence. "It's private, but"—here he tapped his holstered Colt significantly—"I aims t' see fair play. Take off yo' shirts, boys. Take off yo' shoes. No kickin', no bitin', no rounds. 'N' cow country hates a quitter. Git ready!"

Though the place was stifling hot, Joe Pedley shivered as he stripped to the waist. It surprised him to see that his body gleamed with perspiration. Behind him, on all sides, he heard the low, monotonous undertone of many voices, arguing, giving odds, covering bets, pleading profanely for room. Then he looked across the hard-packed dirt at the man he hated, and all sense of his surroundings passed away.

Calmly, eagerly, he studied the figure that approached from across the ring. He studied the corded neck, the massive shoulders, the mighty pectoral muscles, with that deep cleft between them where the chest bone was, the sturdy arms that could hit like piston rods, the rippling shield of sinews that protected the abdomen. Curly, he guessed, would outweigh him fifteen pounds—a hundred and eighty, perhaps. But Curly was older, nearly thirty. At thirty, Joe knew, a man begins to slow up. That was why Curly feared him in the arena. Speed, that was it! Speed! He must rush Curly—keep after him—give him no chance to rest. Stab in and hook, whatever happened. Take one to give two. The Chuckawalla Kid fixed his eyes on the sneering mouth—the mouth he planned to strike.

Curly Johnson laughed. "Now then,

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baby," he taunted, "when yuh comin' t' git yuhr spankin'?"

The noise of the crowd ceased abruptly, in that electric instant when men suspend breathing. Then, "Go!" shouted Uncle Dan, and they emptied their lungs in a roar that shook the stable to the rooftree.

They met in the center of the ring, these two, lithe, young athlete and hardened gladiator, three times bucking-horse champion of the world. They met with a rush that brought them toe to toe, slashing, stabbing, hooking to head and body with vicious blows that raised the red and cracked home like bullets. Toe to toe they stood, while you might count to fifty; then the boy gave ground.

He leaped back, caught his balance, and side-stepped instinctively as Curly charged. That wasn't the way!

Again the boy rushed, his two fists driving with the speed of light. *One-two, one-two!* Left to the face to hold him off, then uppercut to the body. Quicker! Inside, now! Smash, cut, hook, and smash again. Out of a clinch by a quick writhing of the body. Breathe deep, then push in!

Curly Johnson was no fool; he gave as good as he got, but the speed of the boy worried him. The grin had left his lips, now split and swollen. He retreated cautiously, watching his chance.

On came the Chuckawalla Kid, arms swinging wildly, head down. Curly crouched low. He swung his right from the floor with all his weight behind it. His knuckles glanced from the boy's jaw, spinning him in the air, and sent him crashing to the hard dirt in a rolling fall.

Knockout!

The crowd went wild. But the Chuckawalla Kid had staggered to his feet and, bent half double, was weathering the storm of blows as Curly followed him about the ring.

They were breathing deep now, great gasping inhalations of exhaustion. Ten minutes had passed, ten minutes when every nerve and sinew had given its uttermost. Neither human hate nor human flesh could endure much longer. Joe Pedley had no idea of the passage of time. He was conscious only that his body ached with intolerable pain, that his heart seemed bursting through his chest, that his mouth was dry with a terrible salty thirst. Through the red flood that ran into his eyes, the hot flood that he must continually wipe away, he saw the crouching torso of his enemy, blotched with crimson, gleaming with moisture, the hateful, distorted face that was no longer a face at all.

Push in! That was it.

Wearily the boy dragged himself forward. A throbbing pain shot through his left arm as he drove home. Then, strangely, something before him was weaving to and fro, half-closed hands hanging helplessly at the knees. Desperately the Kid stepped closer, wide open, as he swung his right. Right, left—and——

Was it Curly Johnson who lay stretched on the brown dirt at his feet? Curly Johnson, who had cut his cinch? Consciousness came flooding back.

He heard the tumultuous shouting of many voices, saw men rushing forward, felt a hand clap down on his bare back; and then a strange, quick sound like splintering wood, followed by a yell of fear. A bright object dropped beside him with a clatter and crash. A lantern! The thing broke in a dull puff, like the bursting of a paper bag, spreading a great opening flower of yellow flame.

"Fire!"

In that crowded stable, piled high with bales of hay, panic entered into the hearts of men, driving them before it in a senseless stampede for safety that bore the Chuckawalla Kid on its mad tide. High above the uproar sounded

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the crackling voice of the fire, swept by the draft through the open doors. Sheets of scarlet and gold leaped up through the billowing smoke that filled the tinder-dry stable almost on the instant.

The boy stumbled, sprawling across the threshold as the tide poured over him. The night wind, blowing on his heated body, was gloriously cold. He lay there comfortably, reluctant to move. He remembered with elation that Curly wouldn't ride in the finals tomorrow. What a fire it was! Better get going.

But as he crawled to his knees he turned to look behind him into the flaming, crackling inferno that was stable twenty. And there, under the rolling pall of smoke, far back in the clearer zone along the floor, he saw a half-naked figure, lying motionless. Curly wasn't out!

He didn't hate Curly any more. Curly and he were square. He yelled the awful news at the top of his voice; then he crawled back on hands and knees among the showering sparks and leaping, golden tongues.

He reached his prostrate enemy, fell across him in that cleared space of trodden earth, fought to get the slippery weight across his shoulders. When he failed, he caught a wrist to drag Curly along the floor. His lungs were stinging with the smoke that made him cough. His head swam. He lay flat, squirming toward that square of darkness, so far away. Then strong hands seized him, cool night air blew on his face; and he knew no more.

It perplexed him, when he awoke—that circle of men standing about him in the lantern light. Somebody was kneeling, holding onto his wrist. Joe Pedley sat up with a jerk. "Heck!" he ejaculated weakly. "What yuh makin' all the fuss about? I'm all right."

But when he tried to rise it was Uncle Dan Meyers who threw an arm about his shoulders and held him steady. "Don't be in such a durn hurry, Kid," he warned. "Doc says yuh kind ride in the finals to-morrow if yuh don't mind the brands too much. Might be worse. But t'-night, young man, I reckon you'd better come home with me."

So from then till the sun had worked round to Uncle Dan's best bedroom at something after eleven o'clock next morning, the Chuckawalla Kid was dead to the world. Perhaps he would not have awakened till afternoon if Uncle Dan had not shaken him gingerly by the shoulder:

"Time to git up!" the gray old rodeo boss informed him; and in answer to the question in the boy's eyes, "Yeh, yuh got Curly out. He's down in the horspital right now, gittin' over the bastin' yuh handed him. That, 'n' the time he spent on the fry pan afore you picked him up. Well, I reckon mebbe yuh kin eat breakfast. 'N' then I'll hitch up 'n' take yuh down t' the horspital. Doc called up to say Curly wants t' see yuh right bad."

That is why, shortly before noon, Joe Pedley stood beside a white bed in a room that smelled of iodoform and sterile gauze, staring with a confused sort of pity at the bandage-swathed object that was Curly Johnson.

"That you, Kid?" mumbled the object. "Git out o' the room, nurse, will yuh, please? This gent an' me wants t' talk private."

There was a pause.

"Reckon I got somethin' t' tell yuh, Kid," went on the voice. "I know what yuh—how yuh—— Aw, I guess yuh know what I mean. Yuh sure licked me good. Mebbe I had it comin'. But I didn't cut that cinch, nossuh! I tried t' git yuhr goat, 'cause I seen you was sure goin' t' beat me out o' the championship this season, but I wouldn't do a trick like that, not to nobody. That cinch—well, say, Kid, jest listen hard 'n' keep this t' y'self.

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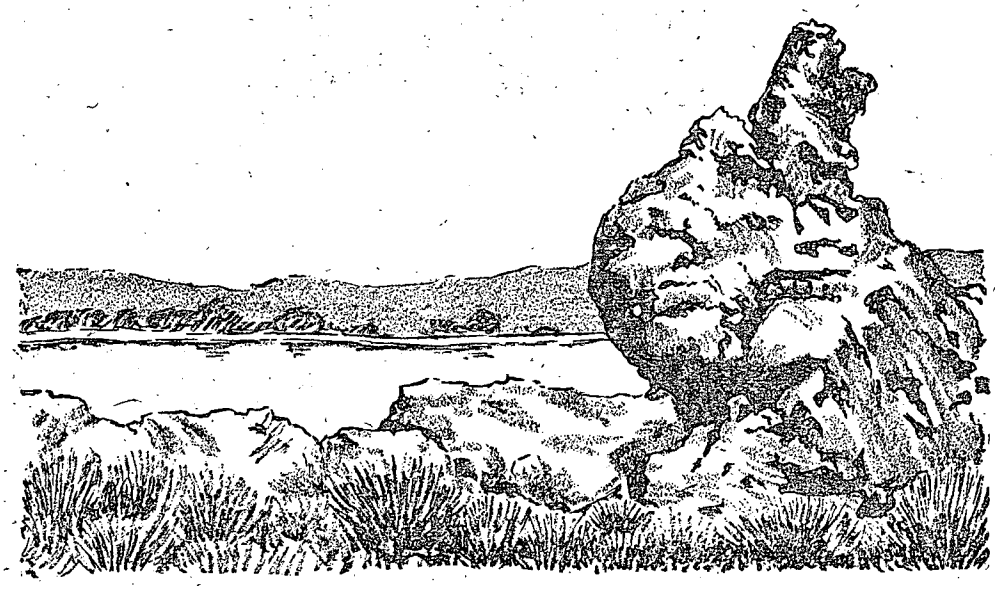
"Y' know that Rosie O'Day, she 'n' me plans t' git married, 'n' she wants I should quit the ridin' game 'n' go back on the ranch we've got picked out. An' I wants one more championship, 'n' then another. Then Rosie she thinks do I git busted up a little I'll see the point 'n' quit. So she slits the latigo on the hull I rid the day before, 'n' gives 'Whitey' Blake five bucks to see I used it ag'in. 'N' then Whitey gits drunk 'n' never puts the game through—which was plumb lucky for me. Ain't that jest like the Irish—willin' t' break a feller's neck 'cause she loves him?

"Well, she sure got her way. I jest now tells her I'm through for good. Yuh got them finals all sewed up for y'self, Kid. Shake, won't yuh?"

The Chuckawalla Kid took the bandaged hand awkwardly. No, he didn't hate Curly, any more, he was certain of that. "Gosh, Curly," he stammered, "it—gee!—it won't be no fun; it won't be——"

But Curly Johnson, three times world champion, cut him short. "Yuh had me beat, anyhow," he said. "Now git along out there, 'n' show them bums how to ride!"



THE DREAD LOCO WEED

ANIMALS as well as humans, it seems, can become addicted to the use of drugs—or, at least, to one drug, which is commonly known as the "loco" weed. Common on range land throughout the West, the weed is the only green vegetation in winter and, therefore, it has a special lure for live stock. The drug it contains causes extreme emaciation and eventually the "loco" or mad condition, which frequently results in death.

The situation arising from unwise indulgence in this weed on the part of live stock is, as may be imagined, a serious one. Twenty-eight ranchers, for instance, estimated one year's loss from the scourge at three hundred thousand dollars.

Relief from this vegetable evil is consequently being sought by the experiment station of Texas Agricultural and Mechanical College. And one step in the right direction has been taken by the establishment of an annual appropriation of thirty thousand dollars for research during the next biennium by the State legislature.

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Stormy Dorn

By Cherry Wilson

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters.

STORMY, runaway orphan, is taken by Trinidad Dorn to the Flying Star. Deem Dorn is annoyed by his brother's keeping land for wild-horse range; Stormy's presence further angers him. The boy saves the life of little Kerry Dorn. Deem's hatred of boy and mustangs grows. Years pass, Flying Star deteriorates; more range is needed. Bronc Craig, and his girl, Cleo, champion rodeo rider, visit Flying Star. Stormy intercepts Cleo. Trinidad, wounded by Deem's cruelty, dies before he can adopt Stormy, as he planned. Stormy takes to the range to guard the mustangs. He defeats a round-up planned by Deem, and captures the famous stallion, Rainbow. Cleo tracks him. She wants Stormy and Rainbow, and warns Stormy the sheriff is after him. The boy visits Kerry; Sultan is gone. Stormy is to be blamed for stealing him. Stormy is wounded, but escapes. Cleo, frightened, seeks Kerry, who goes for Doc Christy.

CHAPTER XV.

"MY PLACE IS HERE!"

BY far the busiest man in Red Coulee, was Doc Christy. He was doctor, druggist, and justice of the peace. A combination of duties that kept him in hot water, kept him on the run, kept him so thin, that "Doc would have to stand twice in the same place to make a shadow," affectionately, folks said of him. "He ought to slack up a bit—not work so hard."

Just the same, they kept him on the go day and night, settling some breach of the peace, officiating at a wedding, or putting up prescriptions. No matter what it was, it was nobody could do it but Doc. And the old fellow was glad to oblige them—proud of the way folks depended on him.

His office was never known to close.

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And the light in its window—often looked for in agony by some night rider in need of Christy, M.D.—was a light that had never failed the Bright Angel country. In the small hours of this night, its cheery glow shone on Doc's silvery head, bent in sorrowful contemplation of the weeping girl almost lost in the depths of his great horsehair chair. One of Doc's "babies"! For he had brought her into this world—bless his soul, how time flew—eighteen years ago. She had not cried on that occasion, he recalled, thoughtfully, wiping his steel-rimmed spectacles, and the fact had annoyed him. Now she was crying hard enough to make up for that early omission, and it was just about killing him.

For he could not possibly do what she asked: Go to some God-forsaken spot in the mountains and bring out Stormy Dorn, critically ill from a fever brought on by a gunshot wound, and hide him from his brother officer, Al Gaines! Feloniously harbor a man, who, if captured, was bound to be haled before him for his preliminary hearing, and who was bound to be captured, if he did what Kerry asked. For nothing could be a secret in which four men participated. And it would take four to carry the stretcher out. Also—as he had just explained, patiently—a procession like that could hardly help but come to the ears of Sheriff Gaines!

"No, honey"—it was the justice of the peace speaking—"I can't go against my sworn duty. If I bring him down, I'll have to report it, and let the law take its course. I'm sorry. You know that I'd cut off my right hand for you, Kerry."

"I know, Doc!" Blindly she reached for that right hand. "Stormy will have to go to jail then! Even if he is innocent—and I know he never took Sultan!—I—I can't let him die up there!" Her lips quivered. "Doc, will you help me bring him down?"

Of course, Doc would!

"But"—the doctor in him warned her—"if he's as sick as you say, it might be fatal to move him. I'll go up with you, honey, but I believe he's better off where he is, if he can get careful nursing."

Might be fatal? Kerry got up, very pale, her lips set in decision that gave her the force and dignity of a woman much older.

"I'll see that he gets it," she said—"I'll nurse him!"

Closely, Doc peered at her through his spectacles. "You?" he faltered.

"Who has a better right?" she cried fiercely. "I'm all the womanfolks Stormy's got! We were kids together. We—love each other! I've loved him since the day he came to the Flying Star. He saved my life then—now it belongs to him!"

Doc's glasses fogged. Clumsily he put his arm around her.

"So that's how it is?" He patted her shoulder.

That's how it was, Kerry sobbed.

And blamed if Doc didn't like it! Old Trinidad had been a crony of his. "Horse-crazy," they called Trin. Well, he liked folks crazy that way. The kind of lunacy he couldn't stand was the mean brand. Men like Deem Dorn, so mean that it had put a kink in their brain. There was a man on the verge of a mental breakdown. He'd had a scare when he opened the door and saw Kerry, thinking it was Deem he was wanted for. Instead——

"Fine!" he congratulated her. "Splendid! Perfectly natural! I always liked that boy. Never took any stock in that horse-stealing business myself. When a man rides a horse for years, it's morally his. And I sure admire his pluck—standing up for them mustangs. Don't know what the world's coming to. We sure knew how to value a horse in the old days. But"—frowning down on the brown head on his breast—

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"about you going up there to nurse him —you're a true woman, honey, but you ain't considerin' Madame Grundy. She's a persnickety old dame, and——"

Impatiently the girl drew away from him. "I'm not considering anybody but Stormy!" Her honest eyes were full of scorn. "I don't care what people say, when he's—dying—maybe!"

Neither did Doc Christy give a hoot, personally. But he felt sort of responsible for Kerry.

"So, while it may be bad for Stormy," he decided, "an' is bound to mean trouble, he'll have to come down. There's no other way, unless——" He paused.

Swiftly, with tremulous hope, she caught him up: "Unless—what?"

"Unless——" It was the justice of the peace again, describing an alternative that made Kerry's white cheeks a beautiful pink.

"But could we do that secretly?" He had underestimated her courage, for she faced the alternative squarely.

But his own courage wavered, making him fall back on platitudes: "I don't believe in secret——"

"Doc"—swiftly she put her hands on his shoulders, and there was in her lifted countenance the same, strange glory Deem had once seen by starlight —"could it be done?"

He thought of all the reasons why not. Unfortunately, he bethought himself of a brother officer he could trust, a friend at court——

"I—don't—know——" said neither the M. D., nor the J. P., but the man, long Kerry Dorn's friend, "but, we'll do it, honey!"

It was three a. m. by her wrist watch, when Cleo, keeping weary vigil by Stormy's cot, heard the approach of horses and, slipping out to the ledge, discerned three shadowy riders winding over the brow of Thunder Mountain. They were coming to take Stormy away! And she was seized by a panic to run—hide—not that she was afraid of being involved, for she had risen above that. But she had not the courage to meet strange eyes.

As she ran back in the cave for her hat, Stormy turned on his pillow.

"Kerry," he whispered.

She bent over him. "It's Cleo. Kerry's coming right back."

He tried to raise himself. He seemed to be listening. Relaxing, at last, a look of infinite pride and peace came on his white face.

"She's stopped the pounding!" he said.

And Cleo rushed outside. The horses had stopped below the bluff. So she fled around the ledge, and down over the rocks, in the perilous dark, the perilous way she had discovered to the old crater where Rainbow was. Rainbow! The only friend she could go to like this—on fire with jealousy, and flying to pieces, now that the strain that had held her together had suddenly snapped.

"I'm through—through!" She told the wild horse, hugging his satiny head to her aching breast. "He don't need me now! What's left for me? I've lost you, too, Rainbow! For I'll have to tell Kerry how I—stole you! Then I'll lose even his respect. He'll hate me—for stealing you—when he wasn't able to help himself!"

Down in that wild spot, at that desolate hour, with eyes tight shut, and silent tears streaming down her cheeks, she relived her every moment with Stormy. That first moment, when she had bet him she would ride Sultan, and he had said, "Not if I know it!" He had thought her cruel! Oh, she had seen the look he gave her spurs and bit! And it had made her mad, and she had said, "I bet I do—and you know it!". Inferring, she remembered, in a torment of humiliation, that she could make him like her so much that

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he would not care how she rode Sultan!

She had meant to tame him! Her bitter, self-mocking laugh died in a sob. What must he think of her? He was so fine and clean. You could not take care of a delirious man and not know what was on his mind. Nothing on his but Kerry! Nothing about Kerry that could not be put in a book for the world to read! What must it be like—to be loved like that? Oh, she knew! For she relived, too, the moment when he had thought she was Kerry!

Long, long, there in the dark, she raked over the embers of her charred heart. She had held all the cards. She had lost, had lost more than she knew was at stake—for she had lost love. It was better to do that, they said, than never to have loved. A sharp, smothering pain caugh her breath. Of Rainbow piercingly she asked: "What fool said that?"

Suddenly she wanted to see Stormy again—if only from a distance—if only leaving!

And she tore from Rainbow, flung herself up the steep trail, in terror now lest she had waited too long—that they would be gone. But, coming up behind the cavern, she could hear their voices still down there. And groping pantingly to the ledge, she heard, after ages, a murmur of voices, and then saw dim forms descending the steep staircase of rocks, and out of the gloom two horses emerging. On them were two men Kerry had brought. Where were she and Stormy? Why weren't they going? A terrible fear overwhelmed her.

Wildly she brushed through the pines, stopping at the entrance of the cavern, halted by some indefinable quality—such as that which, unconsciously, hushes the voice in a sacred edifice or—in the presence of death.

High and bright burned the fire, heaped with fresh fuel. Its red light flooded to the vaulted arch of the rock roof, revealing the still face of Stormy in profound sleep, thin and wasted by fever, but, somehow, strong—somehow, indomitable. Revealing, also, the Flying Star girl sitting beside him, her lips parted, like a child face to face with some wonder beyond comprehension. Slowly, now, Kerry turned eyes of purple fire on Cleo, who swaying into the cave, cried, "He's dead! That's why they didn't take him!"

"No!" Kerry's voice sang. "He's getting well—he's made the turn! The doctor gave him a hypodermic to make him sleep. All he needs now is quiet and care—thanks to you, Cleo! Oh, I'll never be able to thank you!"

"Don't!" begged Cleo, in searing shame. "I can't stand it! Don't ever thank me!"

Kerry went to her and put an arm about her. "You're unstrung, Cleo," she said, her eyes soft with pity. "You're played out. And no wonder! You must go home and rest. Take a long rest, Cleo. I'll look after Stormy."

So final that sounded! Incredulously, Cleo said: "You're staying?"

And she saw on Kerry's face a dawning wonder even greater than her own. "Yes," she whispered, her eyes journeying about the wild place, the walls of stone, the flickering fire, the rude cot and the sufferer. "Yes," she repeated. "My place is here."

"But your father?" cried Cleo, remembering Deem Dorn, and his mutterings, and his restless, mad motions!

"To-morrow," said Kerry steadily, though tears beaded her lashes, "my father will get a letter from me, mailed from town, telling him I'm gone. After that—I'll have—I'll want—no other home!"

Through Cleo's mind flashed the comforts of Kerry's home. The big, cozy, even luxurious rooms of the Flying Star, its cool piazzas. And though she did not understand, she honored the girl.

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"Kerry," she said earnestly, half of the bitterness washed from her soul, "you're the bravest girl I know!"

She left them. And Kerry went out with her through the pines. The merest hint of gray lightened the eastern sky, though Night's cloak still lay over the black ranges below.

Cleo said: "The night is going!" And it was as if a seeress had spoken.

But, upon one of those girls, its last black hour fell darkly!

Halfway to the Buckhorn, Cleo pulled up short. She had not told Kerry about Rainbow! And she must, for no one but herself knew where he was kept. It was the hardest task the undisciplined girl had ever faced. But bravely she vowed:

"I'll go back—once more. To-morrow, I'll tell!"

CHAPTER XVI.

"SOMEBODY'S GOIN' TO GET KILLED!"

FULLY intending to lead Rainbow to the cave, call Kerry out and show her that brand, Cleo returned to the crater the next afternoon. But, falling in love all over again with the splendid, red stallion, seeing how loyally her love was returned, her nerve failed. She could not bear to give him up, could not bear to let Stormy know what she had done. Though he must know the lie she had told Kerry—that he had made her a present of Rainbow!

So, with guilty avoidance of the cave—though she was wild to know how Stormy was getting along—she returned to the Buckhorn, vowing to go back the next day and confess. But the morrow found her no braver. Nor did any of the eight stifling days that passed, in each of which she covered the long, hot miles to the crater.

All the time between, she wandered, hollow-eyed, wan, a lost soul, about the Buckhorn, scarcely knowing what to do with the empty hours, her idle hands. But her mind was full of thoughts of the youthful outcasts, and she longed to go up, see if she could help, but lacked the moral courage to face them. She knew they did not want for any material thing. She told herself there was nothing she could do if she went. Once she had glimpsed Doc Christy coming down the trail. Stormy was getting proper care.

But she was haunted by the cruel plight they were in, the terrible drama of their position. With Stormy, hated, hunted, powerless to lift a hand to prevent the wholesale slaughter of the animals he loved fantically, utterly—as she loved Rainbow!—powerless to prevent the awful desecration of what, to him, was sacred ground. With Kerry forsaking father, friends, heritage, everything, and loyally cleaving to him, sharing his exile, taking up the cross he was forced to lay down.

Indirectly, she heard of them. For Bright Angel tongues were wagging hard, and every bit of gossip was promptly relayed to the Buckhorn.

The night following that in which she had summoned Kerry from the Flying Star, a neighbor, stopping for supper, stunned the table.

"Ain't it too bad about Kerry Dorn—runnin' away from home?"

"What?" cried all the Hoyts, big, little, and in-between.

"Yeah! Didn't you hear?" asked the gossip, with the relish of having a new audience. "They say Deem was almighty mean to her. Abused her shameful. So she up an' left—night before last. Afraid of him, I reckon."

"Poor girl—I don't blame her!" The news affected "Lark's" appetite. "I wish she'd 'a' come over here. We'd 'a' made room for her—wouldn't we, ma? Know, Dave, where she is?"

Breathlessly, Cleo listened. But Dave didn't. He even thought it necessary to apologize for it.

"Nobody does—unless it's Deem.

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One of the Flyin' Star boys said he got a letter from Red Coulee, with her hand-write on it, an' blew up proper. The boys over there is about ready to turn tail—say Deem ain't responsible. Pete Hansen—he's been there since Trinidad's time—has took it on hisself to write for Cherokee. He's been workin' for the Hash Knife outfit over in Powder River country. They look for Cherokee most any time."

But Kerry's disappearance fell a week short of being a nine-day's wonder. For, two days after Dave had contributed his choice morsel, a chance puncher, dropping in for dinner, delivered himself of the amazing tidings that Stormy Dorn was again riding Bright Angel Range! Probably hadn't been shot at all—Gaines couldn't hit the broadside of a barn. And the kid sure meant business this time, for he was taking pot shots at every one crazy enough to monkey with those mustangs!

"Why," narrated the waddy, ladling out a big helping of gravy, "yesterday two Double M boys started a wild band near Silver Springs. They was givin' it a run, when —*Bing! Bang!*—the bullets begin to whiz all around 'em. Too danged close to be comfortable! They got out of there while the gettin' was good. An' to hear them tell it, they ain't goin' back, no time, no siree, not at all! Plumb onhealthy to run them mustangs!"

Lark Hoyt put down his fork. "Know when the round-up's comin' off?"

"Right soon, I hear. The corral's done. But Bronc keeps the boys hammerin' nails in it—for a stall. They say Bronc's plumb——" Seeing Cleo, he broke off, red to the ears.

"Don't spoil a good story for the sake of relationship," she encouraged him.

But the embarrassed waddy did not go on.

Alone in her room, Cleo gazed out of her window, beyond the crimson streaks of the broken buttees, to the mountains lifting blue as blue. And she thought of Kerry—that slim, little, blue-eyed wisp of a girl—riding those wilds, putting fear in men's hearts, teaching them to keep hands off of the mustangs, risking death for the man she loved. And more of the bitterness left Cleo's heart. For, as she brokenly murmured:

"It's no disgrace—to have your time beat by a girl like that!"

But she thought of the future, and it seemed to stretch a black, dreary waste, with never a horizon. Ten days, and Red Falls—crowds and uproar, dust and conflict. Would she ever be able to ride again with the old love for it? With the old spirit? Where was she going to find the strength for it?

Strangely, it was to her father she turned. Strange, because there had never been the least degree of companionship between Cleo and Bronc. He was proud of her, but secretly afraid of her. And, like many a parent, he shrank from any display of affection as though it was shameful. She was casual and aloof with him, paying him back in his own coin. But, all at once, she had a craving to see him.

So, braving the pitiless sun of the next afternoon, she rode up to Spirit Gorge. To her eyes, the corral, built in the same spot as the one Stormy had made them tear down—was done. But men were lazily hammering spikes in it. Her father was nowhere in sight. And she asked one of the men where he was.

"In conference," the fellow grinned. "You'll find him around the bend with Dorn."

She went on, having some difficulty in picking a path for her bay through the heavy slashings. For here, at its neck, the gorge was almost choked with deadfalls. And, added to these, were the limbs and tops of the evergreen

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trees used in building both the corrals. There had been no rain in months, and the sun had drawn out the pitch, filling the air with a sweet, resinous smell. It was well, Cleo thought, that this was a sort of no-man's land, far from any ranch, for it was a veritable fire trap.

Rounding the bend, then, she saw Deem and her father. She heard them first, for their voices rose hot. They were sitting their horses under the east wall of the gorge, and she noticed how Bronc's seemed blue to the rough rim of the opposite wall, and how greedily Deem's kept flicking up. Neither man saw her, so she drew rein a little way off, waiting to speak to her father alone, and paying small heed, at first, to their heated discussion.

"Expectin' a shot in the back," Bronc was earnestly telling Deem Dorn, as he twisted about to reassure himself by sight of that bullet-proof wall behind, "ain't what it's cracked up to be That kid's back! He's on the job! You heard what happened to the Double M boys? Waal, it's happened to mine!

"Along about sundown yesterday, two of my crew comes across a two-year-old colt what's been run out of a wild band. By some fluke, they corners it agin' a bluff, an' git a rope on it. While they're fightin' that hoss, a shot comes from somewhere, snappin' that rope plumb in two, and the colt gits away! An' another bullet lifts the hat off one of the boys! I tell you, Deem, if we keep on somebody's goin' to git killed!"

"Somebody is!" Involuntarily a shudder ran through Cleo. Never had she heard anything so bloodthirsty as Deem's cry!

"See this gun?" raved the man, slapping the rifle scabbard beneath his right leg. "It packs a bullet—with that coyote's name!

"He's been a jinx to me from the first!" Shriller, more awful rose Deem's voice. "Think how I was then—you heard about my girl?" He thrust his face toward Bronc, who nodded. And, at his nod, Deem Dorn laughed, threw back his head and laughed, until Cleo thought she would never hear any other sound again.

"That's the sell! Everybody falls for it! I ain't got no girl—hear? She's dead—dead—he's put a spell on me! But I'll break it. I'll kill him on sight! Trin can't stop me! Trin keeps——" He seemed to realize, then, his hideous ramblings, for, with a visible fight for self-mastery, he demanded of Bronc:

"Ever goin' to get that corral done?"

"Yeah." With trembling hand Bronc lifted his bandanna to his forehead.

"When?"

"To-morrow." Cleo noted her father's vast reluctance.

"Then call the drive for to-morrow," Deem ordered. "I'll tell Gaines to be here. He guards that corral. I'm ridin' that rim," pointing up to the sheer west wall. "On sight, I tell you——"

"Deem," Bronc quavered, "somebody's goin' to git killed!"

The rancher swung on him with an oath. "Afraid it'll be you, huh? Afraid for your hide? Afraid of that cub! You yellow——"

"I'd sooner be a live coward than a dead hero!" declared Bronc shamelessly. "My hide's worth more to me than a thousand hoss pelts! For two cents, I'd pull out, an'——"

"You pull out," snarled Deem, with a fearful grin, "an' see where you land! I'll send Gaines to Cache Valley! He'll take care of you—you horse thief!"

Abruptly, he spurred down the gorge. Bronc stared after him, his shoulders sagging, aged ten years in the weeks since Cleo had seen him. And a pang of pity pierced her heart; suffering had taught her to feel for others. And she knew what weighed on him—guilt, in hiding Sultan to outlaw Stormy. Why shouldn't she know? Wasn't she a horse thief herself?

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The stricken look that thought brought was on her face when Bronc saw her. And he started, staring at her. And, still staring, he rode toward her.

"What's the matter?" he cried hoarsely. "Been sick, Cleo?"

With a sad, quiet smile, she denied that.

"Girl, you look mighty peaked! Your eyes are like two burnt holes in a blanket. I wouldn't 'a' knowed you. You've changed, Cleo!"

She said bitterly, "I've heard that before."

Bronc did not doubt it. Why, she looked like she had been dragged through a knot hole! Gadding, he bet, early and late. And in a week she would be fighting to hold her title!

"How you aim to ride," he scolded, "in that shape? You look like something knocked you plumb galley west!"

"Something has," she said, with her black eyes far away, but with a quiet misery that silenced Bronc. "Don't worry, dad—I'll pick up the pieces."

He made her get down, and walk out of the sun—a rare mark of concern for him. And he sat down on the flat rock beside her, wondering what could have dealt her this jolt, wishing that she would tell him. And she wanted to. But the old constraint was there, prohibiting confidences. So they talked of everything else. Of the drive to-morrow—Bronc wished it was done.

"Somebody's goin' to git killed!" He seemed to have that on the brain.

And they talked of Deem Dorn.

"Mad as a hatter!" Bronc vowed. "I wisht I'd never had any dealin's with him!"

She begged him to quit, let Deem Dorn catch his own mustangs, and go home with her to Cache Valley. He did not need the money, and they could rest in the few days left. But Bronc couldn't, he said—he was in too deep. She heard what Deem said about Sultan. If Deem got it in his head to charge him with the theft, he could sure make it hot for him!

Then they were silent, each solemnly thinking of what the morrow might hold, but unable even to imagine the full horror it held!

"I'll be plenty glad when it's over!" Bronc declared. "Somebody's goin' to git—— But ain't you comin' up to see the excitement?"

"No," she said, in a wistful, far-away voice, not dreaming that her presence in that valley of death was one of the things the morrow held. "No—I couldn't bear to be even near."

And that, from Cleo, worried Bronc.

And when she swung in the saddle to leave, with a strange, scared, little-girl look about her, suddenly Bronc was not afraid of her. And he laid his hand over hers, saying with a gruff tenderness she had never heard in his voice:

"Girl, take care of yourself!"

It was this that Cleo had hungered for. And she felt as though for the first time she had found her father! They must not get so far apart again. They needed each other.

Riding out of Spirit Gorge—a stage set for colossal tragedy—she was deeply worried about him. By Deem's threat to accuse him of stealing Sultan. The man was capable of anything! And if anything went wrong with the drive—Cleo determined that Sultan would not be at the Cache Valley Ranch to-morrow!

So, instead of riding back to the Buckhorn, she headed her bay for home, drawing deeper yet on her seemingly inexhaustible reserve that she might catch Sultan that night, and lead him the twenty-five miles from her father's ranch to the secret spot above Stormy's cave. For she could think of no hiding place half so safe.

Dawn was near when she picketed the big black in the old crater with Rainbow.

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Then, too tired to ride another step, chained to the hills by some nameless presage of catastrophe, she unsaddled her horse, and lay down on the warm grass. And, looking up at the stars through the telescope of the dark crater walls, she thought and thought. She slept, at last, fitfully, with many a horrible dream. For Deem Dorn invaded each dream—rifle in hand, crying, "I'll ride that rim! On sight—I tell you! My girl! That's the sell! My girl's dead!" And sometimes Stormy came into the dreams, shouting at her to save Kerry—from a horse rearing over her, from Deem—mad with the curse of Cain!

And she would wake in trembling terror, in awful doubt as to whether she ought not go even yet, and warn him and Kerry of what was so soon to be? Tell them that she had seen, returning, from a sentinel peak, innumerable, far-scattered camp fires burning?

For, again, an army of men had invaded wild horse country.

But, on the verge of going, she would recall Kerry's vow to save the wild boys, somehow! If Kerry knew, she might do something desperate. Better for all concerned if the wild horses were rounded up and gone. So much the better if it could be done without their knowledge.

So Cleo decided. A decision made in good faith, however regrettable.

CHAPTER XVII.

"I'M GIVIN' UP!"

AGAIN, on an exquisite, pink-flushed dawn, the wild horses of Bright Angel Hills were warned! Here, there, everywhere, all over the range, at the same time. They were more easily warned, for their former experience. For now they knew the trickery of man. They were nervous, still, from the last pursuit, from the knell of hammers that had rang in Spirit Gorge all this week—sounds they associated with their last terror. And the lush grass of spring that had soaked up sounds then had dried with the long drought and protracted heat; it was so brittle that it cracked underfoot, warning the wild.

Simultaneously, from all points of the range, bands of riders routed the mustangs. The browsing deer heard, and fled. Coyotes loped swiftly to inviolable dens. Fat, black bears, ripping rotten logs apart for luscious ants, shambled off at amazing speed. Squirrels scolded the invaders from the uttermost tips of the trees. And the great American eagle, symbol of freedom, circling safe in the blue over Gore Peak, saw—or might have seen—scores of wild bands running for freedom's sake, with yelling riders in hot pursuit.

This time it took harder riding to follow the mustangs. For they ran in frenzy from the first, with that taint of disaster in their nostrils, heavy and tangible as dust, ran any way but in the direction of Spirit Gorge. And they found, as before, that all ways, ultimately, inevitably, led there. For every other way was barred. They ran in an ever-swelling horde—colt, and mare, and mighty king, in one big band, jealousies forgotten in the common peril.

Ever louder, louder, louder, rumbled the thunder in the soil of God's Corral!

Strange that Stormy did not hear it—who had once heard less menacing sounds so far! Strange that he could sit out there before the little jack pines, leaning back against the ledge, thinking, in such utter contentment, how good God had been to him, how good it was to feel the sun again, to breathe fresh air! Strange that he did not feel that electric tingle of horror in the atmosphere!

But he did not—yet! He felt well. He was intoxicated by that deceptive sense of strength common to convales-

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cents, because they had had none for so long, and have more now, proportionate to their needs, than they have in health. For convalescents, just rising from a sick bed, make few demands on their strength. And, sitting there, Stormy felt strong enough to take a man's part again.

This was the third day he had been up. And he did not intend to be down again as long as he lived. A fine business for a man to be in—being sick! Doc Christy took it a heap too seriously—telling him to be quiet a whole week more. He couldn't lop around any longer, letting Kerry wait on him, letting her tramp the hills alone.

He felt a vague uneasiness about Kerry. She had been gone all day. She went hunting almost every day. There was not any need of it—Cleo and Doc had packed in enough provisions for a regiment. But Kerry liked to hunt, she said. And every day she streaked out on foot, taking his rifle. Taking his hat, too, he had cause to remember—for he had to shield his eyes with his hands, as he bent forward to look for her down the trail.

Dear little kid, she had come to him just as she was, when she heard he was sick. In her bare head and, he bet, with her hair blowing in her eyes. And her loyalty brought happy tears to his eyes, searching for her. But he could see no boyish little figure in flannel shirt, riding breeches, and a man's sombrero, toting a rifle. Always, she came back looking tired and white, displaying a bedraggled rabbit or grouse with so much pride that he could not help praising her. She never liked to come back empty-handed, she said, and she wasn't much of a hunter. That had surprised him, for he knew Kerry was a sure shot. Gee, he wished she'd come back!

And when the sun had started on the down grade, and she had not come, he was downright anxious. Walking to the south brink of the ledge, he searched the valley for her. He saw her nowhere. But, standing there, he heard it—the thunder!

He whirled, to see a wild band fleeing helter-skelter down a steep prong of Thunder Mountain! And two horseman spurring after! Instantly, the old fire flashed back to his eyes. And, before he thought, he started toward the cave to get his rifle. Then he remembered that the gun was gone, that he must do nothing to attract the attention of the riders to him. In a few days he would put a stop to that! He would be in the saddle—in just a few days.

But now his worry soared, as it had that night, pacing under the willows waiting for "Dad," when all the time Dad was dead! He could not see Kerry anywhere. Those fellows might run across her! They would take word——

He looked up at the rim above. From there he could see miles farther—maybe see her. And in his anxiety, in violation of Doc Christy's orders, he scrambled up the steep, tortuous trail. Reaching the wind-swept rim, leaning against a boulder, panting for breath, hating himself for his weakness, Stormy looked down the terracing hills for Kerry—vainly! He looked in the direction of Spirit Gorge, but the bulk of the hill mercifully shut off his view there. Then he looked north——

Straight into the pale, strained face of Cleo Craig!

Speechlessly, they stared at each other. He astonished to see her here—of all places—no Romany princess now, but a queen of tragedy—as wild, unkempt, and indifferent to her appearance as he. She amazed to see him here—for she had never thought of him as getting well, but as lying still in that same, senseless stupor she had watched through many a night—swaying on his feet, white—— He should not be up!

"Cleo," the boy cried, recovering first, "what are you doin' here?"

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She stepped nearer—like a sleep-walker. "Every day I come here"—her voice, too, was wild, unnatural—"to take care of Rainbow. See?" She pointed into the dark abyss behind. "I hid him there."

"Rainbow?" he echoed, looking only at her. "I wondered where you kept him. I've wondered why you never came to see us. Why didn't you, Cleo? What's kept you away?"

She drew a deep breath, seizing desperately on her courage.

"Shame!" She took the plunge. "I was ashamed to come. Something I've done—— Oh, you and Kerry can never forgive me!"

Weakly, he grinned. "It must be pretty awful then."

"Awful?" A spasm of pain swept her face. "You don't know how awful! Stormy, I—I branded Rainbow!"

"Yes," he said, still smiling. "You branded him for Kerry. I thought you couldn't. Remember, Cleo? I forgot how you earned your title. I ain't thanked you yet, Cleo, but——"

"You—don't understand!" cried the tortured girl, steeling herself for his hate when he learned of her treachery. "I didn't brand him for Kerry! But for myself! Not with a hair-brand—I burned him—with my own initials! I didn't mean to—something just came over me! I've been almost crazy!"

He did not speak, and she forced herself to meet his eyes—to meet that look she had dreaded. But it was not there! Only understanding with sympathy.

"It wasn't your fault, Cleo," Stormy exonerated her. "It was Rainbow. He got into your blood."

Incredulously she whispered, "You forgive me?"

"That's the easiest thing I know."

"But Kerry——" A thought grayed Cleo's face, and she seized his arms, crying: "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for Kerry," he said, as fear, like a cold and sodden hand, clamped on his heart. "She went huntin'. She took my rifle——" Before the girl's look, his voice trailed off.

"Don't you know?" cried Cleo.

Blankly he asked her, "What?"

"Where Kerry is? Why she's got your gun?"

"No," he said. But even as he spoke, he knew. He knew—yet he did not know. Could not name it, but felt all the cold fear of it!

But when Cleo was through—when swiftly, graphically, she had told him how the valiant girl of the violet eyes had guarded the mustangs, bluffing the men off that range, making them think she was he—— When his mind added the poignant picture of Kerry returning, played-out, white, and nervous, why, he went wild with the knowledge!

"Why didn't you tell me?" And now Cleo saw something almost inimical in his eyes for her. "Did you think I'd let her risk her life for the mustangs—for anything?"

"But I thought you knew what she was doing? I heard her tell you she would save them!"

"When?" Stormy cried.

"When you were sick!"

Suddenly, the boy sank back on the rock with a groan. She had! Getting well, he had remembered. But he had thought she had just said that to quiet him. It never dawned on him that a little kid like Kerry could do anything. Oh, he'd have to watch her like a hawk after this! And when they held the drive—she had said it wouldn't be for some time—why, he would be well, and——

"I stopped them once," he thought aloud. "I'll stop them again!"

Knowing what was taking place at that moment, Cleo pleaded with him to give up the fight. It was inconceivable that he could thwart Deem Dorn always. It was a beautiful dream—to make a wild-horse refuge of Bright

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Angel Range. But, after all, wasn't it just that—a dream?

Steadily the boy answered her. "If Dad Dorn had lived a few hours more, it would have come true—without this trouble. A dream? Cleo, it was Dad's dream to keep this range wild horse country. It's always been Kerry's an' mine. It means more to us than any real thing. More to me than anything—but Kerry!"

She saw his utter devotion to the girl in the very way he spoke her name. And, again, doubts warred within her. Ought she to tell him what was going on? If she did, he would be crazy with worry. He could not do anything. If she did not, and anything happened to Kerry——

Then she did not have to tell him.

For they heard another, louder rumble of thunder, saw, across the gap above, a second wild band flashing, and riders pounding after. Looking back at Stormy, Cleo saw that he knew. And her heart bled for him—so hopeless, wild-eyed, baffled!

"Yes," she cried, "it's the drive! They're holding it now! And Deem Dorn is watching for you! He swears to kill you on sight!"

"Then he'll have a chance!" the boy groaned. "For I'm goin' down there right now!"

"Wait, Stormy! Don't lose your head. You can't stop it!"

"I ain't goin' to try! Kerry's down there! She'll try to stop it! Something will happen to her! I'm goin' down—let them hold their round-up!"

"But the sheriff's there, Stormy! He'll——"

"He's the man I want to see! I tell you, I'm goin' to give myself up, before something happens to Kerry. Quick, get Rainbow for me!"

"No, Stormy! You aren't able to ride! You——"

"Get Rainbow up here!"

She started toward the crater, and stopped. "I've got to bring him around by the valley," she called. "Go down to the foot of the bluff and wait for me. Go slow—you'll have plenty of time, Stormy!"

But he did not go slow. And he almost went crazy waiting for Cleo. She came, riding her bay, and leading Rainbow, leading also another horse that looked like—was, unless he was seeing things again——

"Sultan!" he cried.

Shrilly the big, black answered him, prancing for joy, as Stormy staggered toward him.

But Cleo spurred between. "You ride Rainbow," she said firmly. "Your case is bad enough. No need to make it worse. You know Sheriff Gaines. He's got a one-track mind. If he saw you on Sultan, he'd get it into his head that you'd never been off him. But, if you go down on Rainbow, and he doesn't see Sultan until the fact that you've given yourself up has had time to percolate, he may view things different. I'll keep him out of sight, until we see how things come out. For understand, Stormy, I can't tell you where I got him, without incriminating—some one I love. And I know you won't ask me to do that!"

No, he could not ask anything more from this girl to whom he already owed so much. He could not ask any one to do that! And, rather than waste time arguing, he climbed on Rainbow's back, conscious, even in his bitter anxiety, of the reproachful eyes of Sultan.

They set off at a walk for Spirit Gorge. But it was not long before Stormy was loping hard. Cleo saw him reel in the saddle.

"Take it easier!" she pleaded, riding near to catch him if he fell. "Remember you've been sick, Stormy!"

"Think I can forget it?" he flashed. "Think I can forget that I've lain flat on my back, an' let my—let Kerry do that? Suppose they'd shot her! Sup-

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pose they see her, now, an' think she's me—— Oh, Heaven, she's wearin' my hat!"

Down on the mustang trail, cutting across the canyon to Spirit Gorge, they had a moment's view of the open. They saw wild horses running from canyon to canyon in desperation, and ever being turned back, ever forced into the stream, pouring out of every valley, ravine, and gulch! And they saw distant riders, who took no heed of them, believing them to be horse hunters themselves.

For they rode wildly, madly, with Stormy "pulling leather" shamelessly as blackness, dizziness, assailed him, hanging on anyhow he could, nor caring, so he got there and gave himself up before the doomed horses reached Spirit Gorge, before Kerry committed some mad, brave, splendid thing for him that would mean her doom!

But they were too late for that.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE STAMPEDE.

HIGH on the west rim of Spirit Gorge, a madman with a loaded rifle paced his nervous horse. In his range of vision was most of that deep, narrow gash chiseled out of solid granite by the waters rolling down from unremembered ages, wide at its portals, but narrowing in its twisting, two-mile length to the neck in which Bronc Craig had built his second corral, on the site of the first, which Stormy had forced them to tear down.

Now, Deem Dorn, wholly in the grip of the ravaging spirit rampant in the hills, heard the mighty thrum of distant hoofs, and watched in the rabid hope that Stormy would try to destroy this one. He cast his mad eyes up and down the gorge, thirsting for one glimpse of him.

"On sight!" he babbled, his itching fingers tightening about his rifle. "No, Trin, you can't stop me! Yeah," breaking into frightful laughter, "somebody's goin' to get killed!"

And, in ghastly expectation, he raked the gorge with lightning gaze, missing nothing.

Yes! Missing the slender figure crouched in the buck brush, a short way above the corral, where Bronc Craig and Sheriff Gaines stood guard! Here, Kerry had been since early morn, praying to be shown some way to keep her promise to Stormy and save the mustangs—and now no nearer a solution than when she came, except that she was more desperate, more ready to seize any reckless chance.

There was about her now none of the flash and sparkle of Rainbow River. But she was like the river—cold, white, voiceless, under winter's ice. She was frozen by the awful responsibility she had taken upon herself, by the strain of having to shoot at men—shoot close enough to convince them that she meant business, and yet not hit one; by the strain of keeping this from Stormy—keeping from him any hint of the drive, of which she had known since last night, when she, too, had seen innumerable, far-scattered camp fires gleaming; by her horror at what was about to take place here—that men, for gain, could plot to wantonly snuff out a thousand wild lives, in defiance of the dying wish of the man who had made provision for them.

Most dreadful of all was her natural horror of fighting her father, whom she loved, though he had turned against her, loved the more, now that he was not responsible for his deeds. But she had no doubt as to where her allegiance lay. Crouching there, her soul torn by a sense of her helplessness, words rang through Kerry's brain—"for better, or worse. Till death do us part!" This was the fight of Stormy's life. He was not able to fight. They must not deal him this crushing defeat! But how

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could she stop them? Always that thought persisted.

Again she looked at the corral—yellowed by a week of sun—a stanch, impregnable dam. She looked at the men, guarding it with drawn guns, at Bronc Craig, nervously standing against the opposite bluff, as if to forestall a shot in the back, licking his lips, and nervously looking up the gorge; at Sheriff Gaines, planted against the corral, ponderous and immovable as one of the logs.

She could not make them rip it down, as Stormy had done. They were on guard against such a move. But it must go! How? That maddening query again!

Desperately— as her strong nerves beat the far, far reverberations of thundering hoofs—every possible agency of destruction flashed through her mind—earthquake, wind, flood, fire——

Fire! Her heart leaped. She saw, as Cleo had seen, the neck here jammed with the dead débris of two corrals, with fallen logs, brush, and pitchy pines. A spark would explode the mass, and the fire would sweep from wall to wall, cutting off any possibility of the mustangs' being forced into the corral! For this place would be an oven, the heat so intense that no man could face it to fight the flames. The corral would go. And Spirit Gorge would be open again!

Quickly, as the thought came, she was putting it into operation, running, behind the screen of brush, for the biggest pile of slashings, planning her escape as she ran. She could not dash back through that guard. But, a half mile up the gorge, was a ravine leading out of it. Men would be guarding it against the mustangs. But what matter if she was seen by that time—the corral would be doomed, and her work done!

Reaching her goal, unseen by Bronc or Gaines, she dropped down, drew a match from her pocket, and struck it against a rock, shielding it in her trembling hands until the flame burned strong. Then, with lips set tight and a prayer in her heart, she dropped it into the pitchy mass. Dully she gazed at the swift, red tongue licking through the brown needles, instantly resolving into a hundred tongues all hungrily leaping for bigger prey, and lifted to it, borne to it by the wind she had not realized was blowing, go hissing, swirling in all directions!

She was startled, as a red tongue leaped for her, by Bronc Craig's yell:

"Fire!"

Then came the crash of his gun as he shot at the spot, as though that would put it out, or as nervous muscular reflexion pulled his finger on the trigger, for he did not see her, screened by flames and dense, black smoke.

Kerry whirled and fled, running like a frightened doe for the ravine far ahead, running with dawning horror as she heard above the roar of wind and flames, the fatefullly louder beat of hoofs! That horror gave her wings when, rounding the bend, she saw the thundering horde bearing down, clogging the canyon from wall to wall. And she stopped in despair, trapped between the mustangs and the spreading fire, knowing that, before ever she reached the ravine, the living avalanche would be upon her!

Wildly her eyes sought each steep wall for a place she could scale—and found none. But, as the drum of hoofbeats rose louder, the walls amplifying the roar until it was all but unbearable, she instinctively did the one thing that could save her. In her terror, she ran swiftly for the foot of the towering cliff that made one wall of the gorge, and seeking only to get as far away as she could she pressed back against it, her slight body melting into a fissure in the rock. She stood in her niche, like a marble saint, while a thousand mustangs with terror in their hearts, with bloodshot eyes, and foam-

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flecked flanks, pounded past, leaving in her ears forever the ominous moaning of their exhausted breaths.

As the last terrorized straggler swept on, she rushed out and ran, even more wildly, up the canyon. For, once the mustangs ran into that fire around the bend, they would whirl, retracing their ground in ten times greater terror, and everything in this gorge would be beaten flat by frenzied feet. The most dreaded thing in the rangeland is a horse stampede!

Running toward the ravine that she despaired of ever reaching, Kerry looked ahead, in the wild hope of being seen and saved by the riders driving the mustangs in. She did not realize that they had seen the smoke and, guessing its source, were riding out of the gorge for their very lives, in anticipation of the stampede, eager to get up on a rim, where they would have a view of what was going on below, sure that the boy had scored again!

But the helpless girl was seen.

For, at last, Deem Dorn saw what he had been looking for since the first puff of smoke rose over the rim, telling him more plainly than words of another victory for Stormy—that once more the wild horses would go free! With what an exultant thrill he saw that fleeing figure, wearing a sombrero that was hatefully familiar!

Flinging himself from his horse—which bolted from him as from death itself—he jerked his rifle to his shoulder, took quick aim, and fired.

"Got him!" he yelled, as the figure spun toward him, the sombrero toppling, and a hand going up as if to free the eyes for last, clear vision.

It was a familiar gesture that sent a glimmer of sanity through the crazed brain, checking him in the very act of firing again. The glimmer became a blinding flash as, awfully distinct, terribly near rang the voice he had hated for so many years:

"Stop! It's Kerry!"

He looked up at the man he thought he had shot—wheeling up on the red stallion, reeling, spent, with death on his face! He looked back at the person he had shot—for the little form had crumpled to the valley floor. And, more cruelly sane than he had ever been, he heard, below, a wild roar—the screams of the crazed mustang leaders, fighting back from the flames into which the momentum of the horde was bearing them.

Knowing what it meant fully as well as did the boy, looking down there with eyes of agony, as did Bronc Craig's daughter, pulling up in horror, as did any of the stricken men on the opposite rim, Deem Dorn cast his gun aside and ran wildly along that brink, seeking a way down. And, finding none, he plunged over, striking a ledge fifteen feet down, launching from that again, grasping at rocks to break his fall till they showered after him, snatching at a sapling that came out by the roots and rolled with him.

Momentarily stunned by the move of the desperate man, Stormy gathered his own wits, whirled Rainbow, and raced for the ravine that Kerry had been striving to reach. If, by a miracle, Deem lived to reach her, he could do no good. It was death down there for a man on foot. There was one, slim chance—as mad as Deem's! And Stormy, seizing it, headed the red stallion down the all but perpendicular trough in the wall of rocks. Heedless of, if he even heard, Cleo's frantic entreaty:

"Don't! It's suicide, Stormy!"

If it was, he was bent on committing it for Kerry, who might be dead already, but must not lie in the way of those hoofs, whose drum, his strung ears noted, was no longer a wild roar without rhyme or reason but beating back with horrible regularity! Down the red horse crashed.

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And Cleo, pulling up, realizing that she could be of no help on her horse jaded from last night's trip, felt Sultan lunge against his lead rope, and was desperately inspired. If any horse could keep within reach of Rainbow, it was Sultan! Nobody but Stormy had ever ridden him! Yet, even as the thought flashed to her, she sprang from her horse to Sultan's back, remembering, as one remembers trivial things at crucial times, her old bet with Stormy that she would ride this horse, and that he would know it. Now, she only prayed he would live to know it!

She had no fear of her ability to ride him under any circumstances. But she felt him gathering his muscles, with more fear than she had ever felt for any outlaw in any area—a fear of time lost! And she pleaded:

"Don't fight me! Don't act up! We'll say you're boss! Just be friends, Sultan—run!"

And miraculously, after one stiff, outraged jump at this strange weight on his back, the horse did not fight! Perhaps years of love for one man had cured his hate of all men. Perhaps that despairing plea could pierce even the heart of a horse! At any rate, the black released all his marvelous strength in that wild run down the gorge, reaching the floor but a dozen lengths behind the son of Red Streak.

Now, the two fastest horses in Bright Angel Range flattened out in a short, hard race with death. Only the fact that the red stallion, maddened by the deafening uproar here, became so unmanageable that Stormy could not hold him to a straight course enabled Cleo to keep anywhere near him at all.

Stormy did not see her coming. He did not look back—but on—at the solid wall of horses plunging toward him—at Deem Dorn running across the canyon, full in the path of the stampede! He wrenched his eyes from Deem, whom no power on earth could save, to Kerry, whom there was a frail, pale hope of saving!

Clinging to Rainbow, lashing him, hearing on the hollow ground the wild hoofs ringing, ringing, ringing their ever-swelling song of death, he fought with every atom of will the faintness overwhelming him. For the strength that had seemed so sufficient an hour ago was gone. And he prayed for more:

"God, help me hold out! Just till I git to her!"

Oh, well that Trinidad Dorn did not foresee this day when the two young people whom he loved best would be guarding his sanctuary!

It was all over in a moment, but no detail was lost on the transfixed men watching from that rim. It was a moment of awful suspense, of heroism, many-sided, glorious; a moment of which they never tired of telling; a moment without a parallel on any range!

They saw the stampeding horses. They saw the wild, black-eyed rider of Bright Angel Hills racing toward them on the wild stallion, with Cleo Craig hotly following him on the outlaw, Sultan. They saw Kerry Dorn struggling to her feet in front of the plunging, panic-stricken horde. They saw the boy leap down, catch her in his arms, pushing her toward the red horse, shouting to her. But either the sound of his voice was lost in the dreadful roar—which must be terrific down there, when it was so loud here—or she was too dazed to understand, or unwilling to take the one chance, for she pulled back, shaking her head!

And, in that second, while death sped toward them, the watchers saw the champion cowgirl of the world plunge past them, charging into the very face of the stampede! They saw her all but unseated as the powerful black collided with a plunging leader, sending him bowling back against the jam. They saw her wildly slashing her quirt across

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the mad faces of the horses, who could not stop for the pressure behind. With stopped hearts, they watched, expecting her to go down, seeing the great, black, rearing head and shoulders above the mass, and the girl fighting with hands and feet, anyway she could, checking it—they swore to that!—for one brief instant, creating a bulwark around which the frenzied tide beat as waters about a rock!

And in that instant, they saw Stormy throw Kerry bodily across the plunging back of the wild stallion, striking him a blow that sent him with the rest. They saw Cleo, overwhelmed by the seething sea of mustangs, forced on, fighting to get her horse headed with the stream.

They saw that sea of horses enveloping Stormy. Death down there for a man on foot! They saw a great dun leader, plunging over him, suddenly brace his feet and halt one heartbeat in terror at being so close to man. And, with a movement almost quicker than the eye could follow, they saw the boy grasp his long mane, and springing to his back, while the wild mustang, held as in a vise by the horses closing in, was unable to make any kind of a move to get him off, unable to do anything but run!

They were all three at the mercy of the horses—Kerry, who had saved to those horses their freedom, clinging to the red stallion, a wild leader again, at the head of a band of ten hundred strong; Cleo, on Sultan, trying to stay near her, and the young keeper of the wild on a wild mustang!

Swiftly the thunder rolled out of the gorge. It would be a miracle if one of the three outrode the stampede! Where would it end?

For the wild horses of Bright Angel, it ended in the wildest wilds of the range, where for days they skulked in fear and trembling before venturing back—the dun leader to Gore Peak, the pinto king to Papoose Valley, every monarch to his realm.

For Stormy, the mad race ended at the portals of Spirit Gorge. Here the valley opened, and the horses, spreading out in a flying wedge, gave the wild horse freedom to throw the fainting boy from his back with one terrific buck.

For Cleo, it could have ended here. But she did not slack rein, for she had no way of knowing how badly Kerry had been hurt, and Rainbow, wholly wild again, was running straight for his old range on Thunder Mountain. She urged Sultan after him, but, after a mile, she saw Kerry struggling with Rainbow, bringing him under control, slackening him, so that Cleo, forcing the black to a last burst of speed, was able to grasp his bridle.

And there the stampede ended for them both.

Back at Spirit Gorge, the shaken riders ringed about Stormy, who was fighting to get up against the orders of Doc Christy. For Doc, feeling a more than casual interest in the mustangs, and fearing he might be needed in his professional capacity, had ridden out to see the round-up, and had witnessed that scene of horror. And he judged, by the state of his own heart, the strain it must have been on a participant's, particularly on that of his weakened patient!

"She wasn't hurt," he repeated, trying to calm the frantic boy. "I saw that bullet kick up dust ten feet behind her. She fainted—like you did here. Some of the boys have gone after her an' the Craig girl. Now, lie still a spell, or I'll put you to bed for a year!"

"Doc, he's my prisoner!" puffed Sheriff Gaines, who, in anticipation of at last running his man to earth, had fought through the fire, and now, considerably singed in consequence, crowded through the circle. "I'm arrestin' him—for hoss stealin'!"

The men looked up, truculent, angry,

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in their revulsion of feeling for Stormy. Then Bronc Craig shoved in, scorched, too, and scared out of seven years' growth by what he had just seen down the gorge—something riders were already bearing out of the canyon to Red Coulee!

For, as Bronc had predicted, somebody had been killed. And so sure had Bronc been that he would be that man that he still had an uncontrollable urge to make things right on this earth.

"Gaines," he whined, "honest to gosh, this kid never stole that hoss! I can prove that Deem knew where he was all the time! He made me——" The whole story would have come out then, but Lark Hoyt struck in.

"Anyhow, that hoss belonged to the boy! I've heard old Cherokee tell any number of times how Deem give him to Stormy! Cherokee'll be back soon—ask him! But the best thing you can do, Gaines, is to forget the whole thing!"

But the officer was not equal to any such heroic action. He had hunted long and hard for this man.

"Be that as it might," he stubbornly declared, "he's guilty of other crimes. He's bushwacked this range for months, shot at peaceable citizens, intimidated the owner of this land, an'——"

"Be that as it might, or ain't," coolly inquired the Buckhorn man, "who's goin' to press the case?" And he pointed significantly to the tragic procession just disappearing around the bend.

Completely derailed by this, Gaines was trying to get his thoughts back on the track, when a ring of roofs drew every eye to the party returning. At another time every eye would have swung to the red stallion. But now, every eye was soberly, pityingly, fixed on Kerry.

And she felt the glances. She saw the men ringed about some one! And she slid from Rainbow, leaving Cleo to hold him, and swayed forward, her blue eyes black with dread, her face blanched of all color.

"Now! Now, honey!" cried Doc, rushing to meet her, intent on keeping her mind on Stormy until he could prepare her for the shock to follow. "He's all right—or he will be, when he gets a glimpse of you. Boys, step back! Let Stormy's wife see he's absolutely safe!"

"Wife?" some one cried.

Only Cleo felt no surprise. It was as though she had known all along. In her heart, she knew that she had known.

"Yeah," Doc explained, as all turned their backs considerately on Stormy and Kerry. "I married 'em two weeks ago. Routed Fred Peters, the county clerk, out of bed in the middle of the night to make out the license, an' ride up an' witness it. An' if them kids' marriage wasn't made in heaven, it was as nigh as they could get to it!"

"I'm plumb glad to hear it for one!" Lark said, for all of them. "She won't be so alone. Poor girl, it's going to be tough on her. But he made up for everything—goin'. He died to save her!"

"It was a mercy," Doc said seriously. "He'd have had to be put away if he'd lived. Everything happened for the best."

There was a solemn pause. Bronc—a hard scare had been good for him—actually fussed over Cleo. Sheriff Gaines looked bewilderedly around, sure that somebody ought to be arrested for something, and the ranchers prospected in their minds for more range.

"Waal, Bronc," one of them drawled dryly, "the third time's a charm, they say. Reckon you'll be callin' us out ag'in soon to round up them mustangs?"

Bronc jerked about.

"Who? Me?" He was scared all over again just to think of it. "No, siree! This is wild horse country!"

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CHAPTER XIX.

FOREVER.

ALONG about noon, one week later, a dusty, saddle-weary, grizzled old-timer meandered up the road to the Flying Star Ranch. He had been riding hard. But realizing that he was almost at his destination he was taking it easy. There was no need to hurry. Everything was going smooth out here, they had told him in Red Coulee. The funeral was over—Deem hadn't lasted long after Trinidad. And Deem's girl and Trin's boy had got married. Fine! And—"Jee-roo-sa-lem!"—but it was good to get back!

There was old Rainbow River—rambling right along. And, yeah! there was a rainbow on the foam. And there was the big log house, behind the same old honeysuckle vines. He was surprised to see things the same. Still, he had only been gone three months, though it seemed like three years to him. And a lot had certainly happened in them. He hoped the kids could find some kind of job for him.

It disappointed him that there was no one about when he rode in. But he made himself right at home. He yanked somebody's blankets off his old bunk, and put his own bed roll on. Then he went up to the house to see the newlyweds. He rapped politely on the front door and, getting no response, took the license of an old friend sure of his welcome and walked in. He stamped loudly through the pleasant rooms, but couldn't raise a sign of them. And he went out on the porch again.

There he saw them, coming up the trail from the south pasture, too wrapped up in each other to see him standing there. They were walking slowly. But they had been riding. For Sultan was following Stormy like a dog. And Kerry was leading a—— The old fellow's eyes popped. A thoroughbred! Red as fire—— Why, say, that must certainly be the horse they'd told him about!

Then, hearing another horse approaching, he glanced around, to see a girl on a bay coming up the drive. A girl in picturesque rodeo costume, but whose dark beauty, alone, would draw any man's gaze. Bronc's girl! He had never had any use for anything belonging to Bronc Craig. But if half they said in Red Coulee was true he'd have to take his hat off now to Bronc's daughter. Not to-day, though—not until he'd seen Stormy and Kerry.

So, seeing signs of life at the barn, he headed out there to look up Pete Hansen, who had sent for him, and get the particulars. He would pay his respects to the young folks when Bronc's girl was gone.

Down on the trail, Rainbow nickered and stopped. Kerry looked back. The stallion's tiny red ears had shot up.

"He's always listening," she complained.

"He misses her," said Stormy.

"Well, Rainbow," Kerry promised the horse, "it won't be long now. She's coming to-day." She looked up at the boy, still pale and thin, but beginning to look like himself again. "Are you sure you don't mind, Stormy?"

His dark eyes loved her. "I'm glad you want to! We've got so much, Kerry!"

Yes, they were almost happy. Doc Christy had helped them.

"You're on the trail to happiness," he had told them that sad night. "Ride straight along side by side. But don't ever look back!"

And they had taken his advice, taken no grudges with them. Every injury Stormy had suffered at Deem's hands was forgotten. All bitterness was erased by the memory of the look in Deem's face when he saw death overtaking him before he could get to Kerry. For whatever he had done while living, he had fully atoned for in dying.

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It had been harder for Kerry.

"If he could have lived one moment!" she sobbed to Doc. "Just long enough to forgive me!"

"For what?" Doc demanded. "You couldn't help lovin' Stormy, an' wouldn't if you could! Don't you suppose Deem would have realized that if he'd been himself? If he could speak to you, wouldn't it be to ask your forgiveness? Be happy, girl! Forget what's past. An' give Deem the credit for havin' the same love for you that you had for him."

And Kerry did.

Now, pushing the sun-touched hair out of her eyes almost happily, she glanced up at Stormy. "Didn't I take an awful advantage of you?"

"How, Kerry?" It made him almost happy to see that tiny hint of her old sparkle.

"Why, marrying you when you were helpless!"

He caught her free hand. "Tryin' to back out?" He held the hand tight. "Well, you can't! You made a bad bargain—now you've got to stay with it. You married a man without a cent to his name. Without"—his eyes clouded—"even a name!"

She stopped right where she was to banish that cloud. "I married a man!" she said stoutly. "An' you didn't need one! I had one. One name is enough."

But it did not seem right to Stormy. "You had so much, Kerry!"

"But it was half yours!" she reminded him quickly. "Uncle Trin meant it to be. You got just what he meant you to have—and me to boot!"

He had her! That was all he wanted. He had her right in his arms—violet eyes, screened by soft hair, slim, loyal little thing that any breeze could sway but the hardest storm could not bend—when Rainbow almost jerked away from her, nickering eagerly. And they sprang apart, as embarrassed as if they were not married at all, till they saw it was only Cleo coming.

"Oh, isn't she pretty?" whispered Kerry breathlessly.

And Cleo was—rested, now, and with peace in her heart—ten times prettier than before. For the old, hard, reckless, selfish expression was gone. There was something now behind her beauty—character.

"Yeah," Stormy agreed—"if you like the dark kind. But Cleo don't have to be pretty!"

He did not dream that Kerry knew the truth. For she had never told him the lie that Cleo had told her about Rainbow. That was behind them, too. And this Cleo was a friend she valued, and hoped to hold to the end of the road.

They greeted her warmly, loitering there to talk, for she could not come in, she said.

"We're leaving for Red Falls tonight." Cleo's black eyes were on Rainbow, straining toward her. "Dad's going with me—the whole tour. I don't suppose I'll get to see you again, unless you come to Cheyenne."

There was a note of anticipation in her voice that made Kerry even a little happier. Cleo could find pleasure in her work.

And Cleo was looking forward to the season. For her wild heart was perfectly disciplined. She had made her biggest conquest—conquered herself. And the excitement of the rodeo game was calling. As she had promised Bronc, she had picked up the pieces. Her one pain, now, was parting with Rainbow.

All the while they talked, it grew. She tried not to look at him, but it was hard not to with his red head nuzzling her. And to get it over, she cut her stay short, saying tremulously as she kissed Kerry:

"God be with you till we meet again!"

Stormy said, as she took his hand,

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"Good luck, Cleo! Bring home the bacon."

"I'll do my best," she smiled. "Get over to Cheyenne if you can."

Not until the last "Adios" trembled on her lips did Kerry say:

"Cleo, a friend of ours wants to go with you. He's so crazy about rodeo folks, he's no earthly use at home. Will you take him?"

Some showstruck kid, Cleo supposed. But she would do anything for them. "Of course. Who is he? Do I know him?"

By way of reply, Kerry Dorn gently laid Rainbow's lead rope in Cleo's hands.

Joy is much like pain, when it is intense and sudden. All the color fled from Cleo's face. "You don't mean ——" she cried, joy dazed.

Emphatically they meant it!

She looked at that glorious red horse, the most beautiful horse in the world, already marked hers, and her throat quivered.

"I ought not to take him!" she protested. "He's much too valuable! But I can't help it! Oh, I can never begin to thank you!"

"Don't start!" Stormy pleaded. "Because, if you do, I'll have to start something I can't finish!"

She looked straight at him. "I'll be good to him!" she promised. And he did not doubt it.

Then, still happier, they watched Cleo ride away on the red stallion. She made an unforgetable picture—one that would, this summer, be cheered to the echo all over the West. Kerry wondered if she had not cheated Stormy, after all, by marrying him in such a high-handed fashion. Cleo was gorgeous! But he seemed more than content with his bargain.

They put Sultan in the corral, and had started, hand-in-hand, for the house, when a grizzled old-timer materialized in their path.

"Please, kind madam an' sir," was his surprising salutation, "could you give a poor, broke-down, stove-up, footsore, ol' cowhand a job?"

Cherokee! Kerry and Stormy made a wild leap for him.

When, in the shade of the whispering vines, they had talked it all out, and hired Cherokee to be foreman of the Flying Star again, they were shades happier, looking ahead to bright days on the old ranch.

Out of a full heart, Stormy said: "Gee, I wish we had all the old boys back!"

No sooner said than Cherokee tapped his shirt pocket—the one containing his memorandum book. "I've got the address of every mother's son of 'em! I'll git 'em back."

It did not seem as though the dark-eyed boy who, five years and a half ago, had been literally kicked into the Bright Angel Country, could possibly have a thing left to wish for. But he had.

It was Cherokee who brought it up. Clearing his throat, as one always does when approaching a delicate subject, he asked:

"About the hills—I reckon they stay wild hoss heaven?"

Stormy could not answer. He could not even look at Kerry. He did not know how she felt about the wild boys since the tragedy. He wanted to keep faith with Dad, but it was up to Kerry. And he was wildly happy, as she said quickly:

"Forever, and ever, and ever!"

And, together partners from childhood, partners for life, they looked up at the blue-misted heights where the wild horses would live, free as the unwearying wind that blew up there, subject only to natural laws, an imperishable part of the Old West.

THE END.

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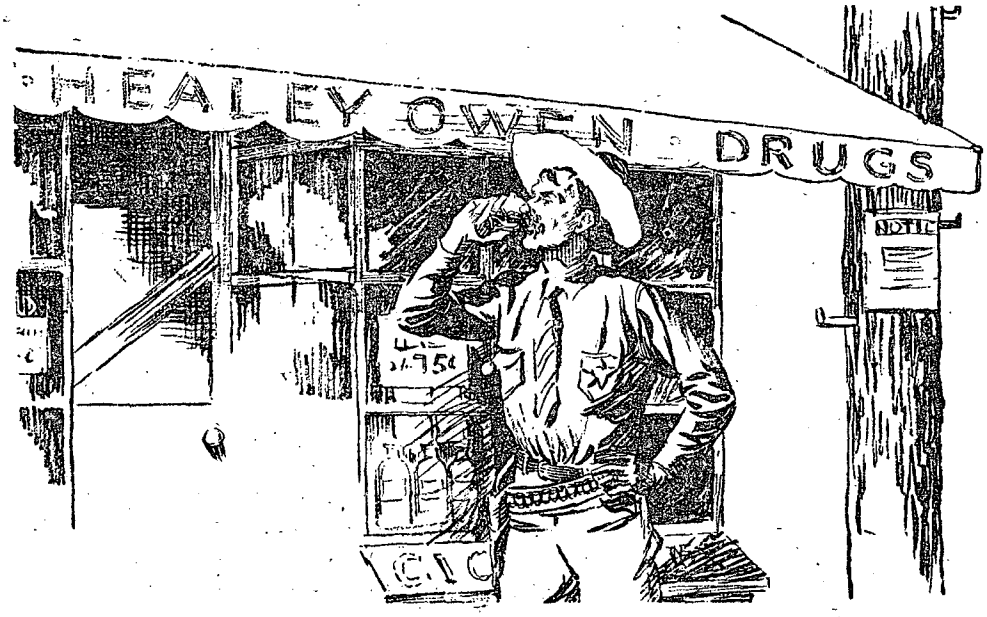

Shorty's Black Deed

By Ray Humphreys

Author of "Shorty Plays Dummy," etc.

"I CONFESS," admitted Sheriff Joe Cook ruefully, as he lifted sleepy eyes toward the big clock on the office wall; "that this here Symonds murder mystery has me bogged down fer fair. I got a dang good hunch that 'Blinky' Barnett we got in jail did the job, but he won't admit nuthin', an' neither will that fool gal, Alice, so thar we are!"

"Shorty" McKay, the youthful deputy, caught himself in the middle of a satisfying stretch and a great yawn.

"Oh, she admits that she was in the Blue Goose Café when Jed Symonds was knifed," growled Shorty, "an' that's that much; but, o' course, that only incriminates her, seein' she denies Blinky was thar at all."

Sheriff Cook knocked the ashes from his pipe.

"I talked to her fer four solid hours—until I was hoarse in the face—tonight, an' that's all I do git out o' her," said the sheriff. "She was thar when Symonds was stabbed, an', she claims, Blinky nor nobody else was thar; an' while she don't admit doin' the knifin' herself, her story amounts to practically the same thing; she's jus' let her blamed affection fer that worthless Blinky Barnett put her in a ninehole. She'll at least git life fer that murder, Shorty."

Shorty shook his head at that remark.

"Naw," he said, "she won't stick to that yarn, sheriff—she'll break; an' when she does the truth will come out."

Sheriff Cook laughed loudly—but mirthlessly.

"Yuh're soft an' easy when it comes to wimmen, Shorty!" exclaimed Sheriff Cook in disgust. "I worked with her four solid hours, I jus' told yuh, an' she didn't break down. She ain't that kind.

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She'll stick to her story until the keows come home to roost, Shorty, as the poet says."

"An' yuh talked to Blinky hisself?" asked Shorty.

"Yeah—talked at him fer two hours afore I tackled Alice," snarled Sheriff Cook, "an' he's standin' pat. Says he wasn't in the Blue Goose Café at the time o' the trouble; denies he ever had it in fer Symonds; jus' blabbers some cock-an'-bull story about a mysterious stranger stabbin' Symonds when Alice wasn't watchin' particular. He ain't go-in' to wilt, either!"

Shorty rolled himself a cigarette.

"I'm sorry I was out ridin' herd on that Mex rustler when all this excite-ment had to happen this evenin'," said Shorty; "fer otherwise, between us both, ef I had been here, I figger we could have busted down them alibi yarns an' got to the kernel o' the real truth.

"Colonel o' the real truth!" exploded Sheriff Cook, with sarcasm. "Huh, yuh couldn't have got to the fust lieutenant o' the rear rank! Don't yuh think I knows how to question suspects? Yuh think I'm a boob? Yuh think that wait-ress, Alice, put it over on me? Yuh think Blinky Barnett played me fer a idjut?"

Shorty puffed hard on his cigarette.

"Yuh ask mighty embarrassin' ques-tions, sheriff," grinned Shorty, "which, fer good reasons, I refuse to answer; but ef I could o' handled that waitress, Alice, I'm bettin'——"

"Oh, certainly!" roared the sheriff. He was tired, foiled, and angry. He had been alone in the office early that evening when word had come that Jed Symonds had been stabbed to death in the Blue Goose Café. He had rushed there, to find Alice Atkinson, the blond waitress there, alone. Blinky Barnett, half-breed, and the proprietor of the place, was absent. There had been ru-mors current of bad blood between Blinky and Symonds, but Alice, on be-ing arrested, had denied Blinky was in-volved, although admitting that she was present at the time of the killing. She refused to admit that she had stabbed Symonds, however.

After the girl had been locked up in the matron's quarters of the jail, Sher-iff Cook had arrested Blinky Barnett at his home. Barnett denied that he had stabbed Symonds. He declared that the girl was probably innocent, too. He claimed that he had heard that a mys-terious stranger was in town looking for Symonds, and he intimated that the stranger must have done the stabbing while the waitress was in the kitchen. His story seemed to be weak, to the sheriff, but questioning had failed to shake him. He had decided to hold him, however, pending developments. The sheriff had just finished his long-drawn-out attempt to wring the truth from Alice when Shorty had returned from another case—full of suggestions and "airs."

"Yuh make me tired," said the sher-iff wearily, as he stared at Shorty; "to hear yuh talk yuh must think nobody kin question a prisoner nor git at the real truth o' any case but yuh! I am sorry yuh wasn't here—fer had yuh been here yuh would o' fallen as flat as I did tryin' to trip up Blinky an' the gal. They kain't be tripped, that's all; an' ef the stories stand in court as they does now it's good-by, Alice, sure as shootin'!"

"Yuh don't honestly think the gal did it?" asked Shorty.

"I wouldn't put it past her none," said the sheriff, "seein' her story is mighty pore to begin with. She prac-tically takes the blame, an' ef she wants it, why, mebbe she oughter be left have it!"

"She's kinda in love with Blinky," said Shorty.

"I know all that," said Sheriff Cook, "but I've told yuh what they both say, an' they both stick to it. Ef it gets to

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court that way, why, good night, Alice! The pen fer her."

Shorty shook his head.

"When I loaded that rustler I brung in inter a cell, I seen Blinky Barnett in an adjacent cell, an' I asked him what he was thar fer an' he told me what he told yuh," admitted Shorty quietly; "but I wouldn't believe him on a stack o' Bibles. He's jus' the kind to knife another bird. I got to thinkin' an' figgerin'——"

"Yuh talk to Alice?" asked the sheriff in surprise.

"No, I kinda discussed the case with Mrs. Armstrong, the matron, in the corridor," said Shorty; "but that was all in——"

There was a soft knock on the door leading to the jail section, and a moment later, at Sheriff Cook's invitation to enter, Mrs. Armstrong, the genial matron, put her head in. She nodded to the sheriff but she spoke to Shorty.

"That Alice is hollerin' fer her hand bag, Mr. Shorty," said Mrs. Armstrong, "an' I told her that yuh said she couldn't have it in her cell; but she says she must have her cold cream, an' powder, an' rouge, an' lip stick outta it, anyhow, so I come to ask——"

Sheriff Cook glared at his deputy.

"Shorty, yuh take that gal's purse away from her?"

"Yeah," said Shorty, "thar's things in it might be useful ef she wanted to pick locks or commit suicide—a nail file, some hairpins, a mirror that could be busted with a jagged edge."

"Keep them out an' give her the rest!" ordered the sheriff.

"Wait a minnit," exclaimed Shorty, and a strange light danced in his blue eyes. "I got a proposition to make to yuh, sheriff. I heard yuh say the other day that yuh needed a new spring bonnet. Yuh seem to think I was braggin' a few minnits ago when I said I thought I could o' busted them suspects' stories wide open—supposin' I bet yuh a new hat that I git the truth o' this stabbin' say in—in——"

Shorty glanced at the clock on the wall.

"It's eleven twenty now," he went on. "Say I bet yuh I kin clean up the whole mystery in—waal—by midnight sharp?"

The sheriff winked at Mrs. Armstrong.

"I kin use the hat, thank yuh," he agreed.

"Done, then!" said Shorty. "Mrs. Armstrong, yuh go back an' tell that gal that I'm busy now, but I'll send in her cold cream, rouge, lip stick, an' powder inside o' fifteen minutes. Also tell her that the rule is that jail lights are doused at eleven thirty, an' see that they are. I'll call yuh when I get her stuff ready fer her!"

"Thank yuh!" said the matron, and withdrew.

"Give me the Healey Owen drug store, please," said Shorty, picking up the telephone. "Hullo, this yuh, Eddie? Waal, this is Shorty. Yuh stay open until I get thar? Sure, it's important—I gotta have a chocolate malted milk with a dab o' ice cream in it. Thanks!"

He hung up the receiver and got to his feet.

"Say," said Sheriff Cook in amazement, "yuh're wastin' valuable time on yuhr fool doin's ef yuh're gonna win that bet we made! What's the idear o' holdin' out that gal's toilet things? An' why order the lights out at eleven thirty? An' what fer do yuh have to have that chocolate malted milk fer at this hour o' night?"

"Chocolate always helps me to think," said Shorty slowly. "Now, boss, yuh wait here fer me—I'll be right back!"

And Shorty was. He was back so soon that the sheriff gasped in astonishment. It hardly seemed possible that Shorty could have gone to the drug store, two blocks away, had a chocolate malted milk, and returned, in such a

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short interval. He had been gone a bare ten minutes. He rolled another cigarette, however, and waited until the clock on the wall showed eleven thirty-two before he touched the bell for Mrs. Armstrong. She appeared in a moment.

"Lights out in yuhr quarters, Mrs. Armstrong?" asked Shorty.

"Yes, sir; but she kicked awful about not havin' no light to go to bed by," said the matron, "an' she sure wants that cold cream. I told her I would git it fer her as soon——"

"She can have it," said Shorty, taking the leather hand bag from his coat pocket and opening it. "Here's the cream, an' the rouge, an' the powder, an' the lip stick. Yuh sure she ain't got no light in that cell now, matron?"

"What light could she have, Mr. Shorty?"

"No matches?"

"None, fer she don't smoke an' I'm awful careful about allowin' matches with my winumen prisoners since that Injun woman we had fer shopliftin' tried to burn the jail down that time."

"Good! Take these to her, Mrs. Armstrong—just as they are—an' turn down any plea she may make fer lights, won't yuh?"

"Sure, Mr. Shorty."

After the matron had departed, Shorty turned to Sheriff Cook, who had remained silent during Shorty's directions to the matron. Shorty pointed a finger at his superior.

"Boss, ef yuh wants to see how great sleuths work, yuh gotta keep quiet as a church mouse from now on until I wins that bet or falls down on it," cautioned Shorty. "I'm gonna talk to Blinky Barnett now fer a minnit, an' bring him out here. I got a idear he'll be right downright pleasant. He may come in here laughin' or grinnin', an' all I want yuh to do is to plaster a big grin over yuhr mug—as ef yuh was mighty waal pleased at something."

The sheriff frowned. "See here, Shorty——"

"Yuh gotta help me out that much," said Shorty. "I don't want yuh to say one single word. Jus' set here, watchin' me, an' him, an' with a smile on yuhr phiz. Yuh understand? Ef yuh hafta force a smile yuh might think o' how foolish I'm actin', or how quickly yuh'll win that new hat, an' the smile may come easier; but yuh gotta smile—dang hang it, boss, yuh understand?"

The sheriff shrugged.

"Waal, I'll smile at fust," he consented dubiously; "but after I sees yuh fall flat on breakin' them stories, I'll jus' laugh right out loud, that's all—right out loud, Shorty!"

"Yuh kin do that, too," agreed Shorty generously. "Now I'm goin' fer Blinky, to fetch him out here, an' when he arrives yuh jus' nod to him, but have a grin on yuhr face."

With that, Shorty left the office. He was back inside of three minutes, however, with Blinky Barnett. Blinky wore a strange expression, a sort of a cross between surprise and mirth; but when he saw the smile on Sheriff Cook's face, he proceeded to grin pleasantly, too.

"Set here an' don't open yuhr trap, Blinky, an' I'll go fetch her," ordered Shorty, pushing forward a chair.

Blinky seated himself, and Shorty departed again.

"Tell Alice that I got to see her fer a minnit an' to toss on her kimono, or coat, or somethin'," said Shorty to Mrs. Armstrong, in the matron's quarters; "but, remember, no lights!"

"Yes, sir."

Mrs. Armstrong was back in a moment. "She'll talk to yuh, sir."

"Yuh come along, Mrs. Armstrong," said Shorty, and together the matron and the deputy went down the short, dark corridor to the cell occupied by Alice, the waitress.

"Alice?" called Shorty.

"I'm here—in the dark," answered the

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girl peevishly. "It's a blamed shame we kain't have no lights in this dump after a certain time; but Mrs. Armstrong said that——"

"Never mind what Mrs. Armstrong said," put in Shorty gravely. "I want to ask yuh a question, Alice. Are yuh—do yuh—think quite a lot o' Blinky Barnett? Are you kinda sweet on him?"

The girl hesitated.

"Yeh," she said finally, "I guess so—kinda."

"Waal, lissen to me then," said Shorty softly. "Yuh've made a mistake, Alice, fallin' fer any bird like Blinky—he don't give a whoop fer yuh. How do I know it? Waal, lissen ag'in, Alice! I been talkin' to him about this murder tonight, an' when I told him I thought that yuh was shieldin' him, he jus' laughed; an' when I told him that by doin' so yuh might go to the pen fer the rest o' yuhr life, he laughed louder'n ever, an' said he didn't give a dime ef yuh did! An' the more I spoke o' yuhr devotion to him, the more he howled, until he most went inter hysterics; an' when I said he shouldn't do that, an' described how tearful yuh looked, an' told him he'd melt with sympathy when he saw yuh, do yuh know what he answered, Alice?"

"No?" said the girl in a tiny voice.

"He said he'd laugh right in yuhr face—that's what!"

"I don't believe it!" said the girl suddenly.

"I'm goin' to prove it to yuh, Alice," said Shorty. "Me an' Mrs. Armstrong is goin' to escort yuh down to the sheriff's office, whar yuh kin see fer yuhrself what a fool yuh're makin' outta yuhrself fer a worthless bum like Blinky. Open the door, Mrs. Armstrong, an' we'll take Alice down right now."

"Oh, no," protested the girl brokenly; "I'm not fit to see him—any one—now. I must tidy up. I put cream on my face—ef I could have a light?"

"Come on," cried Shorty, and his tone was strangely gruff; "we ain't got time fer no tidyin' up, young lady. Leave the cream be—yuhr happiness is worth a lot more than a minnit to put on powder an' paint. Yuh take her left arm, Mrs. Armstrong, I'll take her right. It's dark in the corridor an' yuh might fall, Alice. Yuh got slippers? Good! An' yuhr coat on? Good!"

The sheriff, meanwhile, had become very uncomfortable. He sat silent, with a forced smile frozen on his lips, as Shorty had instructed. Across the room sat Blinky Barnett, with a smile on his swarthy face. The sheriff fumed inwardly, wondering whether Blinky was smiling with him or at him.

"Dang that fool, Shorty," thought Sheriff Cook, "why don't he come back? I'll be hanged ef I'm gonna set here grinnin' like a mummy fer very much longer! I was crazy to agree to it."

The door from the matron's quarters opened and Shorty stepped in, followed by the girl Alice and Mrs. Armstrong. The sheriff, staring at Alice, lost his smile. The girl's face was streaked with smudges of black. In fact, there was more black than white in her face. Her eyes were wide. She looked at Blinky, and that individual, who had ceased to smile for a moment as Alice entered, broke into an uproarious laugh.

"Oh, Alice," he howled, and the tears came to his eyes, "yuh sure are funny! Haw, haw, haw! My gosh——"

And Blinky slapped his thighs in his mirth.

"Alice, Alice, I sure gotta laugh—yuh're a sight fer sore eyes! Yuh'll pardon my laughin'—I feel kinda good."

Alice's eyes had suddenly narrowed to mere slits.

"Oh, yuh feel good, do yuh, yuh laffin' hyena?" she screamed vindictively. "I go an' try to shield yuh, yuh cheap knife-thrower, an' all I git is a good laugh, is it? Mr. Shorty tol' me yuh liked to busted yuhr ribs laffin' at me

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when yuh heard that I was tryin' to take the blame fer the killin'—an' me incriminatin' myself to save yuhr hide, yuh low-down——"

Blinky stopped laughing abruptly. "Say!" he yelled. "What's the idear?"

But Shorty, with a tightening grip on Alice's arm, roared a question that drowned out Blinky's cry.

"Alice, yuh know dang waal yuh lied to the sheriff to pertect that laughin' hyena!" exclaimed Shorty. "Now ain't it a fact, gal, that Blinky did kill Symonds, an' that yuh tried to make us swaller a alibi fer him? Yuh thought he loved yuh; he pretended he cared; but yuh saw how he acted jus' now—givin' yuh the hoss laugh when yuh come in?"

The fiery-eyed Alice straightened up.

"Yes, it was Blinky kilt Symonds!" she screamed accusingly. "Throwed a knife at him when Symonds had his back turned! Then Blinky says to me fer me to take the blame fer they'd never hang a woman or punish her much, an' he gave me the story I should tell the sheriff. That he wasn't thar; that I was, but that I didn't know how Mr. Symonds was kilt—a yarn that wouldn't be a exact admission, he said, that I kilt him, but that would leave me a loophole, mebbe, an' put Blinky hisself clear outta it——"

"Alice!" cried Blinky wildly.

"Take her back, Mrs. Armstrong," said Shorty quickly, "an' me an' the sheriff will be right in to take a formal statement. Let her tidy up a bit, but I'm sorry we kain't turn on the lights fer her. Yuh git me, Mrs. Armstrong?"

"Yes," said the matron, retiring with her ward.

"An' now Blinky," said Shorty, turning to the cowering Barnett, "I'll take yuh back to yuhr cell. Yuh're through, Blinky. Yuh're a fine bird, tryin' to hang a killin' on a gal as though she loved yuh—hidin' behind a woman's skirts!"

"Yuh tricked her, an' me, too!" roared Blinky.

"Yuh tried to trick us with yuhr lies," retorted Shorty, hotly, "an' turn about is fair play in this business! Come on, Blinky, I'm takin' yuh back to yuhr cell!"

Five minutes later, as Shorty gathered up pens, ink, and paper, to take the formal statement of Miss Alice Atkinson, waitress, regarding the killing of Jed Symonds in the Blue Goose Café, the clock on the wall struck midnight. As the twelve strokes ended, the sheriff, who had been puffing gloomily on his pipe, spoke up.

"Waal, Shorty, I guess I buy yuh a hat, 'stead o' yuh buying me a new lid," he said slowly. "Yuh did clear up the murder mystery afore midnight, as yuh promised. But I don't see through all the play yet, son. What in the world did that gal have smeared all over her face, an' why was I supposed to do so much grinnin'?"

Shorty tossed his cigarette stub away with a flourish.

"Simple enough, boss," he said. "Yuh see, I gotta way with wimmen. Soon as I come in an' heard what had happened, I got hold o' Alice's hand bag to work out my idear. I figgered I had to trick her inter tellin' the truth. I arranged about no lights in the matron's quarters after Alice had called fer her cold cream; then I rushed down to the drug store an' had Eddie Owens fill her cold cream container with a lampblack cream—a harmless enough salve, but awful black. When she got it, she put it on, naturally, an' I arranged so she didn't have time to take it off afore she appeared here——"

Shorty chuckled to himself.

"Then I went an' told Blinky, in his cell, that Alice had formally admitted that she had kilt Symonds. I told him that nuthin' would happen to her because she had said it was in self-defense, but I told him she was in the blues,

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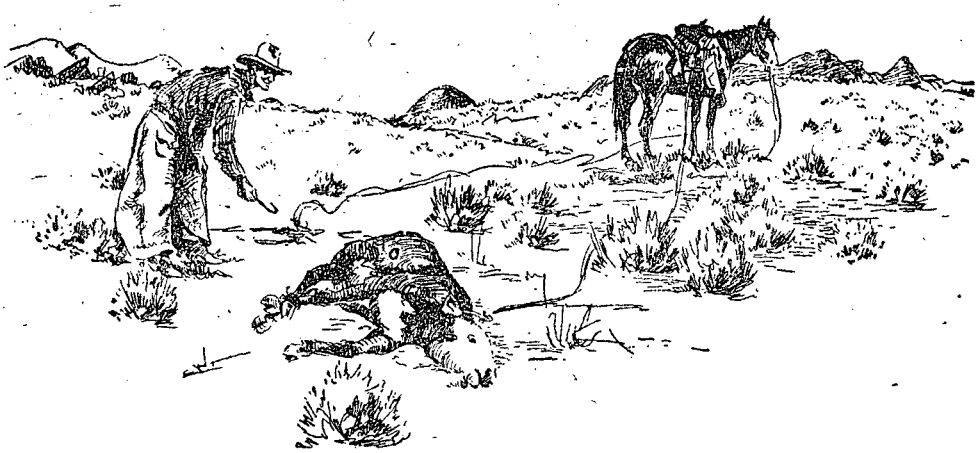
downcast, an' had put her face all in mournin', an' that yuh an' I, boss, figgered that ef we brought her in before him an' he laughed at her fears an' at her mournin'-daubin's on her face, she might snap outta her grief, seein' we had failed to talk her out o' it. I described how funny she looked, an' how yuh had laughed at her, an' I got Blinky all set to greet her with a big haw-haw. He was willin' to help that way an' naturally felt good, anyhow, seein' he was relieved to learn that the gal had taken all the blame in the case!"

Shorty grinned at the sheriff's wide eyes.

"Then before I brung Alice in here I told her that Blinky had been laughin' at her predicament, had laughed when I had told him she took the blame, had laughed when I told him she might suffer a-lot fer it, an' had threatened to laugh in her face ef he saw her! That burned her up right. We hustled her in with a rush before she could remove that black cold cream; Blinky saw her an' thought he was helpin' her by givin' her the laugh; she saw him laughin' at her, an', zowie! she smashes through with the truth."

Sheriff Cook stuck out his hand impulsively.

"Yuh win!" he exclaimed. "Yuh did in twenty minutes what I failed to do in four hours or more. What size hat do yuh wear, Shorty?"



THE BRANDING IRON PASSES

THE branding iron has played an all-important part in the settling of the West. Consequently, it has been almost impossible for any one to write of range life, from either the fact or fiction standpoint, without mentioning the process of branding. Also, there have been sketches showing the throwing of the calf, and the holding him down while an iron bearing the mark of the owner is applied.

Under modern farming conditions, however, there is another and a simpler method of marking cattle that is used almost exclusively. This method, which consists of placing a tattoo mark in an animal's ear, gives permanent and positive identification. And, while it may not be quite so colorful as the old-time use of the branding iron, it has the additional advantages of being painless and easy to apply. In fact, it is found particularly suitable for dairy cattle.

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Water Comes First

By Seth Ranger

Author of "Slow But Square," etc.

"IN a new minin' camp," observed Mike Porep, "it's always the same. First come the miners, then come the saloons and gamblers, and lastly comes the law. It looks to me like the law is arrivin' at War Paint right now."

A man mounted on a tough, calico horse was trotting into the new mining camp. As he stopped and dismounted, Mike Porep left the shade of a mesquite thicket and ambled toward the newcomer. "Hello, sheriff!" he said briefly.

"Hello, Mike," the official answered. "I'm looking for a young miner named 'Bud' Tuttle. Where can I find him?"

"He's hereabouts somewheres," Mike answered. "Generally comes into camp from his claim about sundown to see if anybody's brought in any mail."

"I'll wait," the sheriff announced.

Mike scratched his head thoughtfully. "Now, what in tarnation has Bud went and done?" he growled. "I guess I'd better find out." Accordingly, he mounted a burro and headed for Bud's claim.

While Mike had not struck gold himself, fortune had not only smiled on Bud but had actually laughed violently. Unable to find ground in the lower country in which to bury a miner who had died on the trail, Bud had been forced to seek ground in the upper country. Here he found a badger hole and the gold in the badger's dump that led to his claim. Only by strategy had he prevented the Dresden gang of looters from taking the claim. And by strategy he had bested Dresden himself in a gunfight. Now he was really enjoying life as he panned the dirt for placer gold. His small fortune was growing daily. He had paid back all that he had been lent when he left Gilman Center for the West. From now on his net profits would be velvet.

War Paint had gained its name from the colorful cliffs about it. It was a nice camp, but for Bud Tuttle it was but a way station. He wanted to see it all—the camps and mines of the West; the logging in Washington; the trapping and mining in Alaska, with a whirl at the salmon canneries and hunting big game. He had promised himself he

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would keep going until his feet were in the Arctic Ocean, and War Paint was a long way from the Arctic. Mostly arms, legs, and ears when he left Gilman Center, Bud was beginning to fill out. His experiences had given him a certain confidence, but he realized that he had much to learn in the months and years to come.

While these thoughts were running through his mind, as they so often did, the cheerful shout of Mike Porep floated up from the brush below. Mike had prospected with Bud's father, "Six-gun" Tuttle. Thus, Mike was always welcome.

"What's on your mind, Mike?" Bud inquired.

"Say, you gol-darned cub, whatcha been doin' that I don't know about? Did you know that the sheriff's looking for you?"

"For me?"

"Yeah, for you. Whatcha done?"

"Let's go down and find out?"

"I didn't figure it could be much, Bud," the old desert rat admitted, "but you can never tell. Besides, you led the gang that run the Dresden crowd out of camp, and the snakes might have framed suthin' on you. We made a mistake in lettin' ary a man get away. We should have strung up the whole bunch and you should have killed 'Dude' Dresden while you had the chance. He was tryin' to kill you."

"I know it," Bud admitted, "but I'd like to go through this game without killing even an outlaw. I'm ready, let's go."

As Bud rode into camp he noticed a signboard so new that the paint was wet. It read:

WAR PAINT STATE BANK.
Money Loaned. Deposits Accepted.
Gold Bought.

"That's progress," Bud commented. "Guess I'll bring in my placer gold. It'll be safer here. From the line-up, it looks as if the others were doing the same."

Fifteen or twenty men were standing in line. Each carried a small poke of gold dust, for the country was known as a poor man's camp and most of the miners were making wages or better.

"There's the sheriff, Bud," Mike whispered. Then raising his voice he said, "Here's Tuttle, sheriff!"

"Glad to know you, Tuttle," the sheriff answered. A pair of piercing blue eyes seemed to penetrate Bud's face and look into his innermost thoughts. The sheriff's grip was powerful, but he made no effort to display his strength by a crushing clasp. "Heard you're a better shot than Dude Dresden."

"That is not true, sheriff," Bud answered. "I had to use a little strategy and make him hurry his fire and miss, which he did on the first shot. But he's still a better shot than I am."

"No, he isn't," the sheriff argued. "You put his shooting arm out of commission, though I'll agree he was the better man when the fight started. But you've gained the reputation of being a good man in a tight place, and reputation is a good part of the battle when a man's dealing with crooks. The very fact that they fear him either makes 'em stop before they start, or if they do start, makes 'em nervous. War Paint needs a deputy sheriff. I decided to ride here and look you over. If you proved to be what you were cracked up to be, I planned to make you my deputy. Well——"

"Yeah——" queried Bud. He had not expected this. In fact, he did not want the responsibility because it would interfere with his work, yet he had no intention of avoiding responsibility if it came. "Yeah?" he repeated.

"Put up your hand and be sworn in," the sheriff replied. "And now," he concluded, when the swearing in had been duly accomplished, "go back to your mine—I'm not expecting any trouble

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with the Dresdens out of camp. It's too bad, though, you didn't have something on them. I've tried to hang a crime on 'em for years, but without success. Well, I've got a lot of country to cover and I might as well drift. If you need any help any time, just swear in a few of these old desert rats; give 'em six-guns and Winchester rifles, and you'll have all the help you need. S'long!" And with that he was off.

"A great man to have for a friend," Mike Porep observed. "When a feller slaps you on the back, he may or may not mean it; but when that sheriff pins a deputy's badge on your shirt, believe me, he ain't foolin' either you or hisself."

A thousand miles from War Paint, "Dangerous Dude" Dresden brooded darkly. For several years he had followed the stampedes without much profit, chiefly because most of them had turned out like Auga Malo—a flash in the pan. There was no money to be taken from the men who took it from the ground. Dresden's right arm was bandaged from the elbow downward. The hand was completely covered, and a doctor had informed the gunman that he must learn to shoot with the left hand. "And now with a real stampede on, we're out of it!" he exclaimed. "'Stuffy'!" He turned to one of his gang who had accompanied him from War Paint. "Read this!"

Stuffy read:

WAR PAINT SHIPS
PLACER GOLD.

Accompanied by Deputy Sheriff Bud Tuttle, the first shipment of placer gold from the new strike at War Paint was turned over to the express agent at Salt Hole. The gold is valued at nearly one hundred thousand dollars and was handled through the War Paint State Bank.

"A hundred thousand already," Stuffy groaned, "and we're not in on it! And Deputy Sheriff Bud Tuttle guards the shipment! Don't that give you a pain in the foot?"

"It shows what a few lucky breaks do for a man. That kid and the whole camp probably thinks he's good. I've been trying to figure a way to square accounts and yet not get nabbed." Dresden continued to ponder, his face scowling. "Revenge won't do me much good unless Tuttle knows that I'm the one that got him. H'mm! Stuffy, there'll be another hundred thousand in that bank soon. Get the boys together, we're going to take it."

Stuffy had his doubts. "Most of those miners have waited years to strike it. They'll swarm all over us, Dude. Bud Tuttle may be popular and may be the law, but he won't have popularity enough or law enough to keep 'em from stringing us up. Have you thought of that?"

Dresden's face grew black with fury. "I've thought of everything," he snarled. "If we hit camp at ten o'clock in the morning there won't be many miners around. They'll mostly be on their claims. And what few are about can be handled with sawed-off shotguns, .30-.30 rifles, and automatic pistols."

"How about the pursuit afterwards?"

"I'll handle that." Dude brought his left fist down on the table with a bang. "I haven't overlooked a thing, Stuffy, except Bud Tuttle. I don't see how I'm going to get a crack at him unless he happens to be in town, and unless——"

"Unless—what?"

"He is fool enough to organize a posse and follow us." Then Dude dismissed that angle of the subject with a gesture of impatience. "We'll get the hundred thousand first and Tuttle later."

The cashier of War Paint State Bank unlocked the door of the adobe building and opened a window to air the place. The safe, hauled across many miles of desert, was stuffed with gold

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and records. Two miners were on hand with gold to deposit. "Better keep it, boys, until this afternoon," the cashier advised. "We've got better than a hundred thousand here now. At noon, Bud Tuttle and several others are taking the dust to Salt Hole. After that I'll be wide open for deposits. Hello! Somebody's in a hurry." The clatter of hoofs came distinctly, then grew softer as the hoofs struck the heavy dust of the street. Sam Suddreth, who conducted a general store, put his head out and then put it back in again. Seven men, heavily masked, had galloped into the camp. A glance convinced Sam that the gang had camped near by during the night—the horses were fresh. Five of the men spread around the bank; two entered the building. The two miners dropped their pokes and lifted their hands. One man disarmed them and made sure of their silence by a smart rap on the head with the butt of his gun. The other was knocking out the cashier. The two now threw open the safe door, and hauled out the contents. Books and papers were kicked aside. The robbers staggered out laden with the pokes of gold, which were immediately distributed among the saddlebags. It was necessary to make three trips to clean the safe of some five hundred and twenty pounds of gold.

Heads that were thrust from windows were drawn back as one of the five guards sent a bullet that way. As yet the sawed-off shotguns each man carried had not been brought into action. As the gang wheeled for the getaway a miner dropped behind a rock and opened fire with a six-gun. A second later three shotguns had riddled the man with buckshot.

The bandits drew up their horses before Sam Suddreth's and the two who had entered the bank now ran into the store. "We want every canteen you've got," one of them snapped.

"Canteens all gone," Sam answered, trying to identify the man from the part of his face showing below the mask. "Only got water bags." He indicated a pile of water bags near the door. One of the men gathered the entire lot. A second shot a hole through a similar pile in the window. It was evident he did not intend that the bags should be used in pursuit.

Tiny clouds of dust began forming all over the district as men mounted horses and burros to learn the cause of the shooting.

"Hurry up," snapped the leader, "the whole country's headin' this way."

Sam Suddreth watched the bandits gallop into the canyon below the camp. "You won't get far," he predicted. "There'll be a hundred men after you inside an hour. There comes Bud Tuttle on the dead run."

A streak of dust had appeared on the ridge above town and was growing longer every second. At the head of the streak was Bud, mounted on a black horse that was not much larger than a burro but was all bone, muscle, fire, and nerve. Sam flagged the deputy sheriff down. "Cleaned out the bank," he yelled, "and took a pile of water bags. Must need a lot of water where they're going."

As Bud dismounted the ground suddenly shook from a mighty explosion. Boards from the water tank at the spring in the canyon were hurled high into the air. Spray was cast in every direction. Hardly had the echo died down before a second explosion shook him.

Sam Suddreth groaned. "They've destroyed our water supply! Without water we can't follow 'em." His face grew suddenly pale. "Hang it, boys, if they done a good job with that powder some of us may not get out of this alive! The nearest water is at Granite Springs, twenty miles from here."

The situation was clear to Bud Tuttle now. The job had been planned by

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somebody familiar with the country. Pursuit had been stopped before it was started by blowing up the water supply. The bravest man and the finest shot is helpless without water. And Granite Springs was the nearest supply. He ran to the bank and looked into the painted canyon. Dust and powder smoke hovered over the spot where a well of sweet water had once stood. Originally it had been a spring, known only to the Indians. The prospector who had first discovered gold in the district had naturally found the spring. As the camp increased in size a well had been dug, and a tank and pump installed to care for the needs of the population. There was not another well in camp. The seriousness of the situation was reflected in every face. Most men in the crowd knew more about the desert than did Bud Tuttle, but because he wore the badge of deputy sheriff and had bested Dude Dresden in a gunfight they now looked to him for leadership.

"There they go," yelled one, "eight of 'em!" He pointed across the canyon. Eight riders were slowly moving up the trail that led from War Paint to Granite Springs and on to the Soda Sink country.

Bud turned to Suddreth. "I thought you said there were only seven."

"There were. The eighth must have been down below mining the spring and water tank. That's him, leading the gang. He sits his horse different than the others."

"And is driving with his left hand," mused Bud, who suddenly remembered that it was well to observe minor details. On many occasions he had read of carefully laid plots failing because some trivial detail had been overlooked or not considered important.

Mike Porep pushed his way to the front. "Bud," he said hoarsely, "while I ain't got any gold in that hundred thousand, most of the others have. We don't aim to let it go without a fight. Fifty of us are ready to follow you whenever you're ready to start."

"Mike," Bud answered, "we've got to go slow on this. They're heading for Granite Springs. That means they figure to fill their canteens at the springs and then stop pursuit by blowing up the whole business as they did here. It'll take a lot of water for fifty men and horses to overtake that crowd. This camp hasn't got the water to spare. Do you realize that the only water we have is what happens to be in the canteens scattered among the different claims?"

The seriousness of their faces was evidence that they had considered it. "They worked it slick," a miner said bitterly. "We can't go after 'em because we haven't the water. And while we're sending a man to Salt Hole to telegraph and head 'em off on the other side of Soda Sink, they'll have made it safely, divided the gold, and scattered. Well, all I've got to say is they'd better take plenty of water if they expect to make it across Soda Sink this time of the year."

"They didn't overlook anything," Sam Suddreth cut in. "Why, they not only took half of my water bags but shot up the remainin' half."

"They took your water bags, Sam?" Bud inquired.

"Yeah, dang 'em! Never saw a gang work so slick in my life. Just like a clock—steady and no false moves. Never overlooked even a little detail. If the Dude Dresden gang hadn't been chased out of the country I'd say——"

"It can't be Dude," another interrupted. "I hear he's still in the hospital. Well, Bud, what's next?"

"Are you leaving everything to me?" Bud inquired, conscious of his inexperience.

"Every danged thing," Sam answered, and Mike Porep confirmed it with a nod.

"Then, first, find out how much water is remaining. It'll have to be ra-

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tioned out. Next, start off the best rider in camp on a couple of horses. He can alternate, and that'll help some. See that he does two things when he arrives at Salt Hole—sends a water supply to War Paint; sends a telegram to the nearest town on the other side of Soda Sink to pick up all suspicious characters. The rest of you start digging down in the canyon and see if you can't pick up that water, though I'm afraid the explosion so broke up the rock that it will seep away instead of coming to the surface."

"What's the matter with taking a chance on the water," Mike suggested, "and going after that gang?"

A yell of approval greeted this suggestion.

Bud slowly shook his head. "I know how you feel, boys," he replied, "but it'll only mean that a lot of you will be killed if there's a battle and a lot will die of thirst if they've blown up Granite Springs. I can't see much use of good men being killed or dying of thirst when the matter can probably be handled in another way."

"What way?" yelled Mike in astonishment.

"I think I can bring 'em in," said Bud; "I think they overlooked one little detail. It's worth taking a chance on."

"Listen, Bud," Mike pleaded, "some of us had better go along with you. Even that .44 of yours wouldn't have much chance against .30-.30 rifles, sawed-off shotguns, and automatic pistols. Besides, it'll be eight against one."

"That's true, Mike," Bud answered, "but if it can be handled at all, it'll be done without firing a shot. However, if a bunch of the boys can meet me at Granite Springs three days from now with water, it'll help a lot. Now, I'll be starting."

"How about water for yourself?"

"I've got enough at the claim—took a barrel up last night. You'd better follow and bring back what I don't take. In another forty-eight hours some of the boys may need it."

"I'll fetch it down," Mike promised. "You'll want the fastest horse in camp, I suppose?"

"No. I'll take a couple of burros—they're slow and can get along on less water."

By noon Bud was ready to start on his first official trip as a deputy sheriff. He felt that his reasons for following the plan he had worked out were sound. But he also realized that if he failed men would laugh him off the desert; provided he lived to be laughed at. Mike Porep's expression and handshake indicated that he regarded this as a last farewell.

"Cheer up," Bud urged, "this is not a last look at the remains."

"Eight men with sawed-off shotguns against a man that was only a kid a few months ago. Huh!" Mike shook his head sadly.

"I don't think guns and men will play such a big part in this affair," Bud answered. "I'm taking a leaf from the enemy's book of strategy, you see."

Mike brightened. "Maybe I'll see you again at that. S'long. Some of us will be at Granite Springs."

Mike, with hundreds of others, watched Bud Tuttle head slowly for the Granite Springs country. He rode one burro and led a second which was loaded with canteens and water bags.

Purple shadows were filling the draws as the deputy neared Granite Springs. He saw at a glance that the outlaws had destroyed the well. Thousands of insects that relied on the place for water were buzzing around the damp sand. A lone burro was pawing the ground in a hopeless manner. Other creatures that came to the spot under cover of darkness were doomed to disappointment. It meant they would have to travel many miles to another hole. Some might get through, but many

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would not survive. Bud rode most of the night, rested shortly before daybreak, then headed down a steep arroyo to the Soda Sink.

Far over the desert he could see the dazzling white spot that marked the Soda Sink country. Portions of it were below sea level; the glare was blinding, the heat intense. Traced against the blue sky was the outline of a soaring buzzard. He circled with motionless wings spread wide, watching the miserable, earthbound creatures that challenged the maw of the Sink. He knew that many of them dropped. And when they shot downward, others of his kind as though attached by invisible wires were drawn to the spot.

From the first, Bud Tuttle had trained himself to use as little water as possible. He drank it sparingly but frequently, in order that an even flow of perspiration might be obtained, for the sun dries out the human body with a steady drain that knows no mercy. Twice the burro he rode hesitated and looked back. The burro bearing the water was inclined to balk—they knew. Their hoofs disappeared into a gray, crusted muck. Even Nature had given up the struggle to grow here the most miserable and hardy of her plant life. To save water, Bud adopted the old plan of resting during the heat of the day and traveling at night. It was risky business crossing an arm of the sink after dark, but he let the burros lead the way and so managed it.

The rising sun of the third day found the youth perched on a saw-toothed ridge, studying the lower country through binoculars. Long he lay stretched out, examining every square rod of the dead world beneath. He located a number of dots ten miles way. Then nearer at hand his eyes saw something that made him swallow hard—a thirst-crazed horse.

A faint breath of air swirled about the ridge, then swept into the lower country stirring tiny dust clouds. The horse disappeared, then came into view a half mile nearer. It had changed its course and was now coming toward him. "The poor thing smells the water," Bud muttered. "He's heading toward it."

But raced at full speed down the ridge, caught up bags and canteens, and thrust them into an opening in the rocks. A moment later the horse appeared. It sniffed the ground where the bags had rested a moment, then shifted a few inches to where a half dozen drops had fallen on the sand. With a whinny of triumph the animal began pawing the ground, convinced, no doubt, that water was just beneath.

"Heck!" growled Bud, "what'll I do? He's come to dust again and knows there's no water there. I can't spare him any—not a drop."

As a wounded animal often turns to man in dire necessity, so did the thirst-maddened creature now turn to Bud Tuttle. He could not speak, yet there was eloquence in his eyes as he pleaded for the water he knew the youth had cached near by.

"No!" Bud firmly growled, "I can't do it! Aw—heck! Can't you see how it is? You've got to die. Huh! Maybe I'd better shoot you. It'd be merciful if I did!" Slowly he drew the weapon and aimed.

The horse seemed to know what was about to happen. No man knows the reasoning power of an animal. Possibly the horse realized that death was better than his mad stampede in quest of the water he could not find. The hammer was back and Bud's finger was on the trigger.

"Don't look at me like that," Bud grumbled, "I—I can't do it!" Abruptly he opened his pack and pulled out a frying pan. He poured a quantity of water into the pan and watched the horse suck it to the last drop. "You've forced my hand just that much," Bud complained, "but—oh, well, if it'll get you some-

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where." He headed the horse away from the spot, then slapped it smartly. "Now, clear out," he ordered.

Straight and true the animal headed for Granite Springs. Bud Tuttle released one of his burros, loaded the other, and headed into the glare of the Sink. "I've got to be hard," he told himself, "and kill the next nag I meet. I wonder if being tender-hearted where horses are concerned is a weakness in my make-up? I suppose men would call it that, but I hope it isn't."

Bud Tuttle weakened twice that morning and parted with some of his precious water when thirsty animals came to him because he was a man and other men had taught them to depend on mankind. He told himself he was a fool and a weakling who was endangering his life and the success of his plans by parting with even a small quantity of water, yet he could not bring himself to violate such blind confidence.

Presently he stopped and sent his burro back. This done, he shouldered a canteen and plodded ahead. A mile beyond he topped a low ridge and looked into the barrel of a .30-.30 rifle. "Stuffy!" he gasped.

"Yes, Stuffy!" the man snarled. "Dude Dresden's over there, too. Surprised, ain't yuh? Well, you'll never live to tell what you've found out." Stuffy spoke thickly. His lips were swollen from lack of water. Two men lay on the ground several hundred yards away. It was evident that they had fought to the death over a canteen. "Gimme that water!" Stuffy demanded.

As Bud dropped the canteen, other men rushed in from all sides. The .44 was jerked from his holster by some one who immediately picked up the canteen, unscrewed the top and began gulping down the water. Another man cracked him on the side of the jaw and grabbed the canteen before Bud had fallen to the ground. Other hands laid hold of it and there beneath the blazing sun and soaring buzzards they fought.

Stuffy got the canteen, swallowed a quantity of water as he ran, then handed it to Dresden. The leader's attitude had interested Bud Tuttle. Dresden appeared not to care how many of his men killed themselves off. The fewer men, the less water consumed, the less to claim the loot and the more for him appeared to be his theory. He drank leisurely, then walked over to Bud Tuttle.

"Well, my gay bird," he drawled unpleasantly, "your monumental conceit has led you into my hands. I blew up the water supply at War Paint and Granite Springs to stop pursuit, and I figured that even you would have sense enough to stay where you belonged. Evidently not. Before you die"—Dresden paused and drew his own weapon—"tell me how you expected to win out against such odds."

"I figured you'd rather take a chance on a jury trial and a hanging than to take a chance out here with the heat and death by thirst," Bud answered. "If I'm wrong, I'll probably pay for it with my life. But I don't think any one of you will take that chance. I intended to wait until you'd got a little thirstier, but the horses that got away from you took some of my water and forced my hand."

Thirst had seized some of Dresden's men, but it had not overtaken the leader who, as usual, had contrived to get more than his share of water. His wounded arm gave him a twinge, and Bud Tuttle saw murder in Dresden's eyes as he aimed his weapon. For a brief instant Bud decided he had played a hand and lost, then a wild-eyed man knocked Dresden's gun into the air. "Ferget revenge a minute," he rasped, "and think about life. We only found a canteen of water on this guy and it's gone now."

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Dresden and the others drew away and discussed the matter. "Very well," Dresden said at last, "let him lead us to his cache and then we'll jump him. One thing's certain, he's not going to come in alive to tell who we are."

The six survivors now came toward the deputy sheriff. "We're licked," Dresden said. "What are your terms?"

"First, dump your guns and grub. No extra weight goes. I'll take my own weapon, however. Not that I need it. Water is weapon enough, but I rather like that old six-gun. It's a good gun." He glanced at Dresden's bandaged hand and the latter swore. "The gold will be cached here and picked up later. Now, come on. Dresden's wounded, he'll ride. I'll borrow a horse. The rest of you can ride and tie so long as there aren't horses enough to go around."

Eagerly they followed Bud for the next two hours. The sun's blaze was withering; the buzzards were swinging lower now. Some of these human or dumb animals must soon drop. Then Bud stopped. With smoldering eyes, Dresden watched him dig in the sand. The instant a canteen showed, Stuffy leaped on the deputy. Bud made no resistance. He said quietly: "I believe you men gave me your word of honor you'd shoot square if I took you to water? Well—you didn't."

"We're not crazy, Tuttle," Dresden answered. "Come on, boys, drag out those canteens." He turned to Bud. "All we wanted was to trick you into finding out your water cache."

"There's only one canteen here," a man announced.

Dresden's eyes turned to Bud's. The deputy was smiling. "Water is still ace in this game, Dresden," he said slowly, "and the aces aren't all in the deck—they're scattered along between here and Granite Springs. There's enough in each cache to take you on to the next." He suddenly slapped the horses into action. "Now, you fellows walk the rest of the way; I've fooled with you all I'm going to. You can take your choice. Either follow my trail or —take a chance on the heat and save the county the cost of trying you." Then he galloped away and left them. On the edge of the Sink he paused and looked back. Suspicious of each other, Dresden and his men were following.

Mike Porep's faded eyes looked frequently over the desert. A dozen men were clearing away the blasted rock at Granite Springs. "Don't see him yet," Mike growled, "but dig, dang yuh, dig! Don't dig for the gang of thieves, but dig so that kid'll have water when he comes." He jerked his thumb toward a horse standing in the shade of a mesquite. "One of them outlaw's horses. He didn't get here without a lift from the kid. Dig, dang yuh! He'll be mighty low on water. Hello, here comes another nag!"

With pounding heart Mike watched not one but two horses move slowly over the desert to the water hole. Each came to a stop, sniffed hopefully, was given a small quantity of water, and driven to the shade.

The men worked themselves without mercy. Presently, Mike stopped them. "The danger mark's been reached, boys. We've got just enough water to get us back to War Paint. What'll we do, stay here and take a chance with death, or make sure of life and hit for War Paint?"

A hard-rock miner gasped. "I'm just thirsty enough to think of Bud Tuttle. Let's dig!"

Without a word, they continued their drive into the granite. Some rock came without effort; some had to be blasted with light charges. An hour before sundown they drank their last water. Darkness rolled over the hot land; from the mountains came a cool breeze heavy with the blend of pine and sage. Men

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stuck candles into the rocks and worked harder than ever. One by one they fell exhausted until only a hulking miner named Canaday and Mike Porep remained. Canaday thrust his hands under a rock, gave a heave, and fainted. "Water!" he whispered. "Water!"

"Ain't none," Mike answered.

"Yes.. Under the rock!"

Mike pushed his hand into a hole and drew it forth dripping. "Boys!" he yelled. "Boys! Get up! We've struck water!"

Candle flames cast distorted shadows on the granite walls as the men fell into the hole and began to heave on the boulder. Slowly it gave way; slowly they rolled it from the hole. Then with hollowed hands they scooped the muddy fluid to their lips.

Dawn came in chariots of fire and Mike Porep looked across the desert. He shook his head. "He shouldn't have shared it with the horses," he muttered. "Another good man gone because he had faith in his plan to round-up a gang of crooks and because he had a soft heart for animals. He should be hard, like I am."

And the men laughed softly, because each knew just how hard Mike Porep was. Twice in the next hour some miner climbed the granite boulders above the springs and looked across the desert. And the third time the watcher came down on the run. "Somebody's coming. Look! See the buzzards! Right under them you'll find a man, and he's moving because they're moving."

Mike grabbed a canteen and leaped to a horse's back. "Come on now, nag, and square yourself for what he did for you." On a dead run, Mike drove the animal for nearly two miles. Then he leaped to the ground. A sunburned man was staggering toward him. His fists were clenched and his dry tongue protruded from swollen lips. From deep in his throat came a horrible, formless sound that Mike knew was "Water!"

Mike pulled a towel from his pocket, brought along because he felt it would be needed. He soaked it in water and gently forced it between the parched lips. "Suck on that for a while. Presently you can have a wee bit of water. Ah! Bud, my boy, you're payin' too big a price for your faith in your plan."

He helped the youth into the saddle and headed slowly for the springs. There the men swarmed around Bud, thumping him on the back, shouting words of praise, and it struck the boy that they were overdoing the matter a bit and he guessed they were cheering him up because he, as they thought, had failed.

When he could whisper a few words, Mike Porep flung his arm about him. "We're glad to get you back, son, even if your plan did go haywire. Didn't you save the lot of us from death out there? We'd have chased 'em until our water was gone and—— Huh! What's that?"

"They'll be coming along soon, Mike," Bud whispered. "The boys better go out. They're afoot. I rode part way, but my horse couldn't stand short-water rations and got away from me. Left plenty for them." He indicated those who might be out there. "They'll be together—a yellow lot—each afraid to trust the other out of his sight."

And an hour later the grim men about the hole saw the bandits approach. Again and again they hesitated, yet always the sun drove them to water. With upraised hands they came, surrendered, and drank.

Mike Porep felt like kicking them. "Every one in better shape than Bud," he growled. "Every one of 'em, dang it! For two cents I'd favor stringing 'em——"

"No, Mike," Bud said, "I worked too hard to get 'em here without bloodshed.

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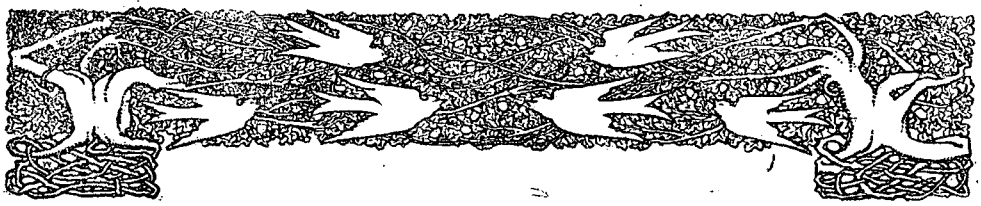
I don't want my water aces to be deuces at the finish of the game. Let's hit for War Paint and the sheriff."

Mike scratched his head. "Good idea, Bud; but how in thunder did you know they'd run out of water? They took a big pile of water bags from Suddreth's store."

"It was that that gave me the idea of bringing 'em without firing a shot. You see, Mike, water bags must be soaked twenty-four hours before they'll hold water successfully. And at the rate this gang was moving, I knew there'd be no time to soak water bags."

"Huh!" growled Mike. "I should have thought of that myself—I've been on the desert long enough!"



BIRDS OF THE WEST AND NORTH AMERICA

Bronze and Purple Grackles

(Quiscalus Arneus et Quiscula)

GRACKLES are found over much of Eastern North America. The purple grackles breed from the shores of Long Island Sound to Georgia, Alabama, and eastern Tennessee, wintering largely south of the Delaware Valley.

The Florida grackle is found along the south Atlantic coast from South Carolina to southern Florida, and westward along the Gulf States to southeastern Texas. These two grackles are very much alike in appearance and only by measuring them can they be distinguished apart. The Florida bird is a half inch less in wing, and shorter in tail length. Its bill is slightly longer.

The bronze grackle ranges through Central and Eastern North America, as far north as Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and West to Montana and Colorado. In size, the bronze species ranges between the other two. At close range it can be seen that the back does not have the brilliant purple of the other two, but is colored a metallic bronze, and the feathers do not have iridescent bars. The habits of the three varieties are similar.

Through the Northern States the grackles are the first birds to arrive in the spring. City, town, or country, it makes no difference to Mr. Crow-blackbird, as he is often called. He builds his nest wherever a suitable location is available, and if no tree or limb is convenient he will place it in a cavity of an old stump or deserted flicker's excavated hole.

The nest is a bulky structure made of twigs, grasses, feathers, or other available material. Mud is used in the construction and fine grasses go to make up the lining. Both parents help to care for the young.

When the farmer turns over his furrow preparatory to planting his corn, the grackles follow in close pursuit for the fat, white grubs. In this respect the bird is a great help, for the worms thus consumed would later destroy the tender corn shoots. As it is, the grackle gets another taste of what the farmer's labor brings forth, and the farmer, forgetful of the service rendered earlier in the spring, goes gunning for the grackle with a vengeance, as soon as he finds him tasting some of the sweet, milky ends of the new corn ears.

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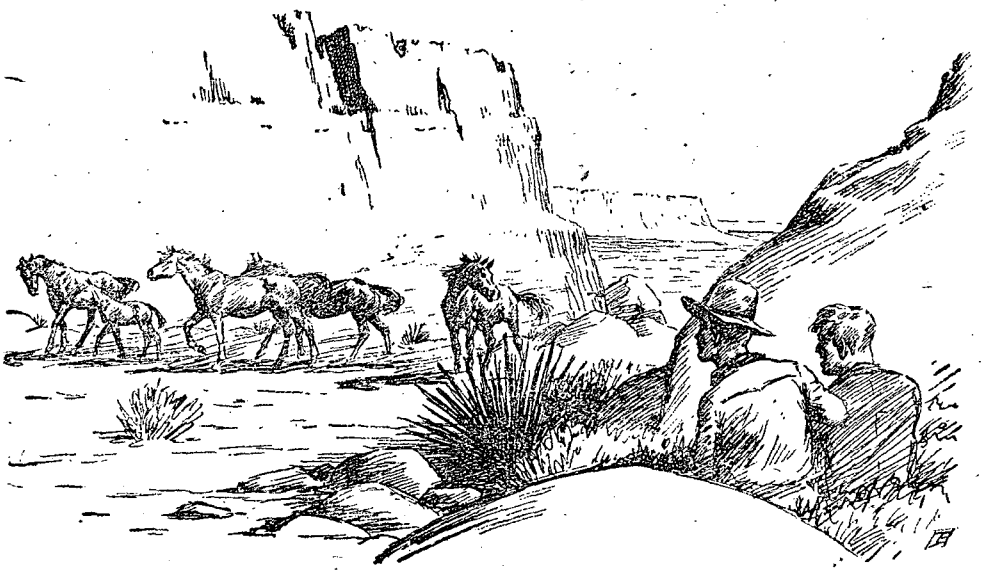

Raising Horses for Pleasure and Profit

By H. C. Wire

Author of "His Place in the West," etc.

(An Article Showing Present-day Methods)

"THE horse is a thing of the past," laments an Eastern editorial writer, "soon to vanish from the American scene as completely as the buffalo."

About the same time Uncle Sam, through the Forest Service, puts aside two million acres of California wilderness land, in which no roads are ever to be built, no dude camps established; a great area to be forever accessible only by horse. Other sections are to be likewise isolated.

No, the horse is not passing; instead, his usefulness is coming back. Raising him is still a profitable business. Jake Power and Bill Wilde can show you that.

On a windy December day of 1927, Jake and Bill sat in a Mojave Desert homestead shanty and hatched an idea. Jake had just come down from the Sierra Nevadas, which bared their white, jagged teeth along the north desert rim. Up in the mountains he had been punching cows through the summer and fall. But the season was over. He was out of a job and, as usual, broke.

Bill Wilde owned the homestead, and wished he did not. It had a shallow well and a windmill, and forty acres of it were fenced. The view of the Sierra Nevadas from his door was worth a great deal, but not in money. He could not sell out for enough to cover taxes.

The idea was Jake's. He was small

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and wiry, with a thin, dark face, and dark eyes that snapped intently.

"Why not?" he asked, leaning across the table toward Bill Wilde. Bill was taller than Jake, light-haired, and by nature considerably less enthusiastic. Neither had yet turned thirty years.

"No money in horses," Bill objected.

"You've been reading the papers!" Jake scoffed. "Look here. You've been up in the Sierras. You know how much stock is used there for pack trains. No limit to the animals we could sell, if we had 'em. We'll breed good stuff. Maybe we'll get a fast one for the races at Tia Juana."

"It'll take time," Bill offered.

"Yeah," said Jake, glancing around the homestead. "And I don't reckon you could spare much of that!"

Bill grinned. "I'll go you," he agreed.

Jake's plan was simple in idea, though not so simple in fact. Good breeding stock takes money. They had none. But eastward, over in the Panamints, were wild herds with some of the finest blood a man could want.

Perhaps it is not generally known that wild herds still exist in some parts of the West. These of the Panamint Range, that mountain chain bordering Death Valley, date back to the early '40s. When General Frémont made his historic march across California in midwinter, to be turned back by the Sierra Nevada snows, he abandoned hundreds of horses along the way. Eventually, most of them migrated into the Panamints.

They were fine-blooded animals, some from Arab stock, all with the strength and intelligence needed in those days of the First United States Cavalry. Down through more than three quarters of a century they have run in scattered bands. At times they have thinned out, again they have multiplied to considerable numbers. A few have been "Injun broke." Piutes or Shoshones have caught them, ridden them for a while, then turned them back to the mountains. But for the most part they have not felt the bite of rope, and have seldom come within sight of man.

For his hunting ground, Jake picked Wild Rose Canyon. Here he had once seen a herd of more than twenty, and here, too, was the easiest place for a catch pen. It was the first week of January when he and Bill Wilde rode up from the desert and made dry camp back a way from the canyon mouth. Their equipment consisted of two good saddle horses, ropes, a month's supply of grub on a pack mule, and a gray bell mare with the instincts of a homing pigeon.

They made camp half a mile from Wild Rose Spring in order not to frighten the herd. But the herd had already seen them and vanished from that part of the range as if never to return again.

"They'll be back," Jake predicted, and began to lay his trap.

Wild Rose is a box canyon, with the spring at its upper end. From the spring, a narrow band of grama grass runs down for a mile or so toward the desert, then ends abruptly in a sandy wash. Here at the canyon mouth is a growth of willows, and in this clump Jake and Bill cut strong poles, dragging them off to one side where they would be within quick reach later. Also, they made many piles of dry willow branches, taking care to keep the piles natural-looking. Then they turned their stock loose up at the spring, and waited.

A week passed. From a high rock near their camp site, Jake and Bill watched. Through that week the Panamints north and south of them lay dry and red and wholly without life.

Bill began to doubt. Jake shrugged. "They'll be back," he said again. "There's another spring twenty miles

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north of here, but not much grass. They'll be back."

About sundown, close to the end of the second week, a dust cloud rolled from a canyon farther along the Panamint skirts, and moved toward Wild Rose.

From his seat on the high rock point, Jake grinned. Bill nodded. "You win," he laughed.

After dark they crept down the mountainside toward the canyon mouth. It was not until midnight, with stars throwing a cold blue light into the bottom, that a shape moved there. A sorrel horse with a white spread-eagle on his face came to the grass and stopped. He stood rigid, beautiful head raised high, nostrils wide with his nervous breath.

He seemed alone, until presently other forms moved in behind him. From up the canyon came a deep snort. Jake grinned. His pinto horse was challenging the newcomer. Then the old bell mare nickered. Spread-eagle lowered his head. For a few minutes more he waited. Then he stepped into the willows, turned, came out. In a moment he went in again, and this time the herd followed.

Jake and Bill counted the forms passing silently below. Ten. Fifteen. Twenty. "By gosh!" Bill whispered. "Twenty-seven!"

"Look good, don't they?" Jake asked.

They sprang down the canyon bank as soon as the herd had gone far enough toward the spring, and quickly lighted the piles of dry wood. At once the canyon mouth was blocked by a chain of fire.

It has been said that a horse will run into a blaze. That is not so. He will run as far from it as possible. If he is blinded, he may blunder into fire, as any human might, but not otherwise.

Immediately the herd in Wild Rose stampeded to the upper end. Working by firelight, Jake and Bill dragged down the poles they had cut and lashed them horizontally among the willow trunks, forming in time a high, tight fence. So for that first part at least, the idea was going well.

You can make a horse or ruin him when first you drop your rope around his neck. In a short time you can fight him into a sort of submissiveness, but forever after he will be ready to fight you back. On the other hand, you can spend weeks with him, making him gentle, teaching him as you would teach a child, and in the end you will have a loyal, willing friend. That way takes patience, skill, and a genuine love for the creature.

Jake and Bill Wilde took the longer way. There in the canyon they spent three weeks on their herd, getting their ropes on each animal daily, handling each one more and more. No breaking was to be done yet, save on Spread-eagle. Jake worked him up to the point where, on the last day, he got a saddle on the fellow's back and rode.

Early next morning they strapped a bell under the old mare's throat and let down the willow bars. Gray mare knew the trail home and struck out on it. Jake had Spread-eagle, and without their leader, the herd fell in behind the mare. Both boys rode in at the rear of the bunch and followed at a run across the desert.

They were all day in reaching the homestead; all day they could not leave their saddles nor drop behind the wild band's swift pace. Gates of the fenced forty were down. Gray mare led in. That night Jake Power and Bill Wilde rolled dog-tired into their blankets to dream of twenty-seven fine range animals brought home at last.

Winter feed was good on the desert that year. Through the months the herd grazed and grew strong. Daily, until spring, Jake and Bill trained them.

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By May each animal knew the feel of a pack saddle, knew how to carry a load sure-footedly over mountain trails, and knew that the men who worked with them were friends.

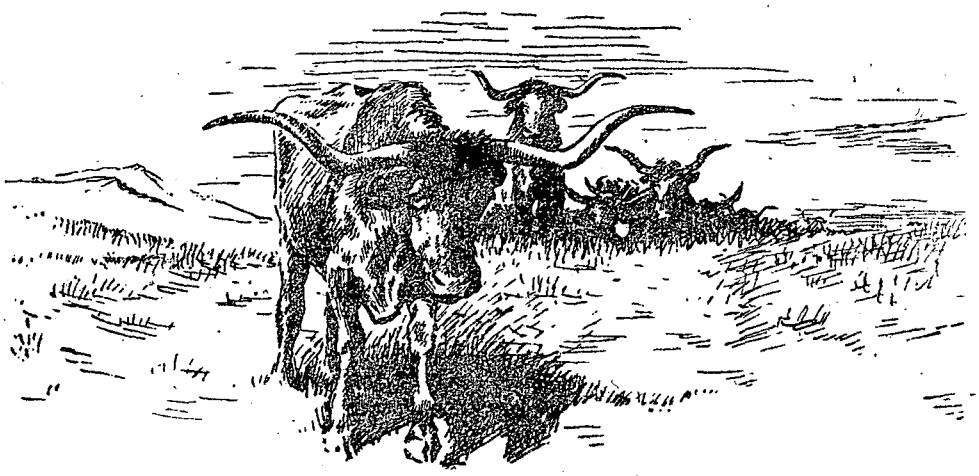
Two of the twenty-seven were incurably bad. They were turned back. Five mares were held for breeding. Twenty were sold by Jake and Bill in the Lone Pine market when trout season, opening in May, brought a rush of fishermen needing pack stock for the high country.

Horses don't pay? Figure it up. Twenty head at one hundred and fifty dollars each. That, of course, was only a beginning, and was but the first step in Jake's plan.

The Los Angeles trading pen, about this time, advertised unbroken Arizona range stock at fifteen dollars. Down there the two boys picked out an even hundred and shipped them to the desert homestead. Some were culls. But most were good-blooded.

Here again was needed time and patience. Without those two things no horse breeder will ever go far. Through that summer and winter the two boys worked. Spring has come again. And this year—1929—the partners will sell sixty animals to the Sierra pack trains at around nine thousand dollars. Besides that, four matched bays are going to a riding club near Los Angeles for five hundred dollars each.

Not all money taken in is profit; naturally, expenses mount up. But the business will grow. And few others, started on almost nothing, could give such increasing returns in both dollars and sport.



NOT THE RED BUT THE RAG

IN exploding a theory long regarded by men as almost axiomatic, Professor Albert Walton, psychologist at the University of Washington, at the same time deeply humiliates all bulls. For, while proving that the color red, alone, does not enrage bulls, he likewise states that these animals are so low in the scale of animal intelligence that they cannot tell red from any other color.

What angers bulls, say Professor Walton, is not the waving of a red rag before their eyes, but the waving of any rag in front of them! In other words, the motion itself is the irritating factor in the situation. But as to colors, this psychologist has recently demonstrated that no animal below the mental status of the monkey—and bulls are included in this lowly category—can distinguish colors in any way, except as being light or dark.

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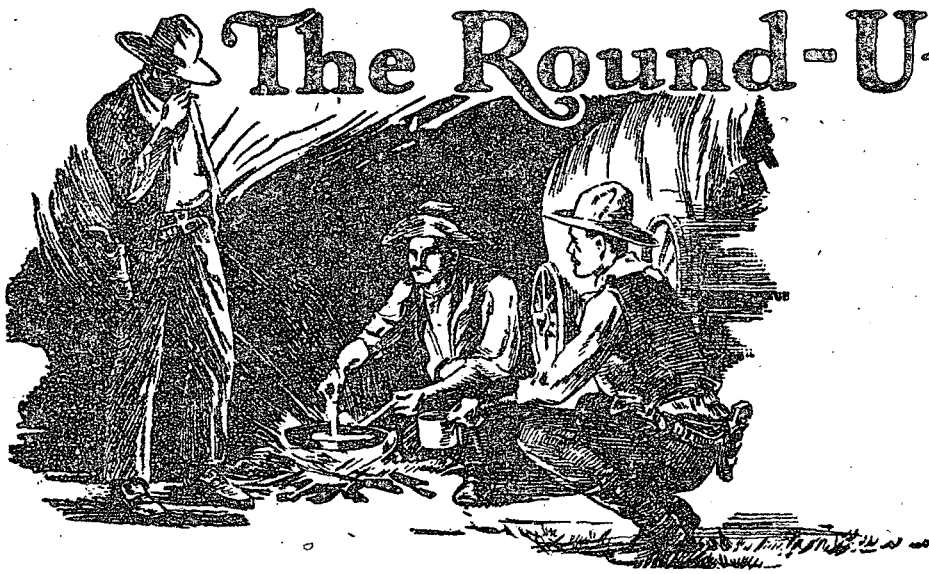
The Round-Up



HERE is R. S. McDonald, who has come all the way from City Island, New York, and he has traveled all this distance to the Round-up to say:

"BOSS AND FOLKS: Haven't uttered a sound, even in praise of all the good things I've read in our magazine, of which I have missed only three copies since it started.

"The authors are all good, but one of my favorites has fallen down hard.

"In 'Couger's Bait,' by Austin Hall, old John Adams is evidently a bad deputy, as in this story he shoots or picks up some deer meat somewhere, and in the closed season.

"Here's hoping that Hall didn't mean to make old John a lawbreaker. Well, good luck to Hall and every one of you, from one who has been in every State in the Union, also in Canada and Alaska for four years.

"Some of my best friends are prospectors and trappers. I have homesteaded in the heart of the cattle country.

"Our magazine is 'top hole,' and one that I always look forward to."

Come on, Hall, step up and answer this old-timer. Also, we've got to take a lickin' since we let your mistake get by.

That's right, Hall, come right into the firelight, so that they can all see and hear you. How about it?

"MCDONALD, OLD-TIMER, BOSS AND FOLKS: I guess the supper is on me! But, really, did you ever forget to put out the cat, or pass up buying that little piece of merchandise that your wife told you to get on the way home? Ever forget to mail that letter? Hey? Well, you see, an author is only a human being. I'll admit that this was a boner on my part. I was so accustomed to having old John chew up venison, that when I spoke of steaks I slipped in the rest.

"But these things sometimes happen. Once in a while the mistake is serious. Your letter reminds me of the famous incident when a certain well-known writer for a boy's magazine started a shipwreck story in a south sea. But at the last moment, he changed the locale to Lake Erie. Unfortunately, the hero was supposed to be on a raft, dying of thirst. Yes, sir! And the story was

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purchased and published. Until, lo! ten thousand letters came in from the boys, wanting to know how a man could possibly die of thirst on a great fresh-water lake.

"Incidentally, I am glad that you like 'Silvertip.'

"It might interest you to know that the character, John Harper Adams, is taken from a real person—none other than George Gapen Adams, the great bear man. George Adams was an old friend of my grandfather, and from the time that I was a little tot, I have heard his deeds recounted. He lived long before my day, of course, along in the '50s, but he proved to all the world that a grizzly is a wonderful animal. He tamed his bears, kept them as companions, and lived with them. One day he astonished San Francisco by riding one straight up Market Street. For several years he put on a show here, and then he joined P. T. Barnum. There is a book published containing all his adventures, if you should wish it.

"Thank you again. Remember, the supper is on me, so any time that you're around, drop in on me at my bunk in the hills at Los Gatos, California."

Well, that being that, we'll take a little exercise, a good swift ride, eh? Yes, the fastest thing we do around here is to chase antelopes. Hop on that quarter hoss of yours, G. E. Lemmon, of Lemmon, South Dakota, and we'll try and stay with you.

"ALL RIGHT, BOSS AND FOLKS: There seems to be, of late, a mania for airing one's knowledge of antelope, and I see that, in their minds, several have run them down with ease. One man in particular practically sat his horse and let the antelope circle round him until they ran themselves down, then he gathered them up in his arms, so to speak.

"Now, of course, all frontiersmen know that antelope are the most curious animals of the plains and will, in a manner, sometimes circle round you for hours, especially if you stick up a red flag—which is called flagging. Through curiosity they will draw near, yard by yard, until one can sometimes get a very close shot.

"But, as for circling round you until they run themselves down, it is all bosh. Antelope, it is true, are averse to leaving their home range entirely, and, if kept stirred, will circle for hours; but, unless crowded, they will run only fast enough for good exercise and, in a manner speaking, keep it up almost indefinitely. No doubt relays could be taken on antelope so that, in a few hours, they could be run down, but one man could not do it on one horse.

"Yes, I have run antelope down on one horse, but I did it only on one breed of horse that we get from Church Island, Salt Lake. They were bred by Brigham Young for cavalry horses and were hot-blooded and the best ever. However, I did know of another string of horses that were brought to Hat Creek, South Dakota, by the Circle Bar outfit from California in about '83 or '84, that ran antelope down on. Most of the running down was by Big and Little George that came with the horses, and it was only play for them to rope deer if anywhere near in the open.

"Earl Knepper and I have been in charge of the State Preserve for antelope for three years, and I am instructed to corral the outside antelope, of which there are something like five hundred. As yet have not succeeded, though we have tried various ways. We are still hopeful, however, of calling on the adjacent ranchers to help us surround and relay the antelope by mixing them with horses that they are not afraid of, and by extending the pasture fence to new territory that they have been using. We hope to be able to secure most of them, for that was the object of the outlay by the State. Every effort will be made to

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preserve them again. They are destroying crops, and the settlers are howling about the law that protects them.

"Readers must bear in mind that antelope are said to be the fleetest animals on the North American continent and that catching them is no joke. I have chased them since a boy of ten and have met with little success in their capture. I hardly think the Indians ever succeeded in running them down to any great extent, but they did throw out brush wings that turned them into more solid inclosures where concealed Indians shot them with arrows with great success. When I first came onto the Moreau River range, in 1891, I found one such inclosure quite intact, about eight or ten miles west of Faith, on the Divide leading around the head of Brushy Creek, now Meade County, South Dakota.

"Readers, don't accept too readily the assertion that antelope can easily be run down, for I know whereof I speak."

E. W. Frase, Woodward Hotel, No. 423 West Eighth Street, Los Angeles, California, wants to say

"BOSS AND FOLKS: I have been a reader of your magazine for seven years, and I am voicing the sentiments of nearly all the hundred members of the club to which I belong when I request that George Owen Baxter give us more of the Thundermoon series. We all agree that this series was the most interesting and entertaining of all the stories printed in your very good magazine. There is but one exception, in our opinion, that was a story, also written by Mr. Baxter and printed a few years ago, entitled 'Beyond the Outposts.'

"Mr. Baxter gave us a good yarn in 'Happy Valley,' but his best work has been his Indian stories, and we are all hoping he will revive the Thundermoon series or originate a new series about Indians.

"Your second best stories are by Max Brand; his Geraldi works are his best. Oblige us and pass this on to Mr. Baxter and Mr. Brand."

A member of the Round-up, George L. Craddock, Cochrane, Ontario, Canada, wants to "air his views:"

"BOSS OF THE ROUND-UP: I've kept silent just as long as I can on this here question of the authors and stories in the old WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE, so now I'll air my views on the subject.

"I've heard some kicking about the 'supermen' of Max Brand and George Owen Baxter, but just let me tell you that these supermen are the characters that young folks like to read about. Who likes to read about a hero that is always getting licked or being tied up and rescued by somebody else?

"Geraldi is the best character that Brand ever wrote about. I have followed him since his first appearance with Cousin Edgar. We want more about him.

"Also, let us hear some more about old 'Grizzly' Gallagher, by Reginald C. Barker. And how about 'Lonesome' McQuirk doing a solo adventure?

"Well, I'd better dangle along now. Here's luck to WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE."

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Miss Helen Rivers, who conducts this department, will see to it that you will be able to make friends with other readers, though thousands of miles may separate you. It must be understood that Miss Rivers will undertake to exchange letters only between men and men, boys and boys, women and women, girls and girls. Letters will be forwarded direct when correspondents so wish; otherwise they will be answered here. Be sure to inclose forwarding postage when sending letters through The Hollow Tree.

SOUTH of the Siskiyou country, in northwestern California, are the wild and rugged rangelands of the pack horse and the burro trails. Out of Dedrick, in Trinity County, the trails lead to the stampede country of the '49 days.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: Out of Dedrick, in Trinity County, northwestern California, is a mining country that remains as in the pioneer days of the early gold-rush days of '49. Dedrick is at the end of the road, and at Dedrick is where the trails begin—trails that are trekked only by mule and pack horse. Here, in Trinity County are the miners' shacks and the gold-ore mills of the pioneer days, and here the old-time propectors have made miles upon miles of prospect holes and miners' ditches.

This is a country of fir, cedar, and pine forests. It is also a country of wild game. Deer, bear, and wild grouse make it a hunter's paradise. If you-all want to trek the stampede country of old California, just make Dedrick your outfitting post and trek the trails of northern California, folks.

Dedrick, California. MRS. P. A. STANLEY.

Back to a home ranch.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: I have been a reader of your department for two years and I see so many others are asking your help that I thought I would see if you could help me.

My husband was raised on a ranch in western Kansas, and I was raised on a farm. Now he is working in the jack and lead mines. It's unhealthy, and he wants to get out of the ground, and I've got all the city I want. I haven't breathed a good breath for years and the doctor advises me to get out in the open. I'm not an invalid, for I can do a day's work with any one, but this mining camp's not good for either of us. I am thirty-two and my husband thirty-seven. We want to find a spot where we can breathe fresh air, and see the sun, and make a living. If anybody can give us any suggestions we'll both appreciate it.

MRS. ARKIE GRIMM.
630 South Picher Street, Picher, Oklahoma.

Would trek westward.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: For some time I have wanted to go West—to a Colorado ranch for preference. I am a married man with a boy of six and a girl of eight. I was raised in the Kentucky mountains and would like to hear from some forest ranger. I love the big outdoors and am fond of hunting.

D. E. SKAGGS.
614 Heaton Street, Hamilton, Ohio.

Bush country of the North.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: We are a couple of hombres who hail from the North country. We are used to hearing the wolves howl at

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night and at dawn, and the moose are so big that it takes five shots from a .30-30 to kill them. There are also lots of deer and grizzly bears to deal with in the Long Lake district. This country contains nothing but bush, rocks, and small lakes. The railroad is built mostly on muskegs. Would like to write to a couple of rolling stones who know his part around Hudson Bay and have orked in lumber camps. F. W.-F. N.

Care of The Tree.

The Isles of Scilly.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: My first thought at the mention of the Scilly Islands was "pirates," so I was filled with glee at the prospect of spending a holiday among them—the islands, not the pirates. Just after I landed on one of the islands I heard strange sounds and thought I had come upon a mystery, but the answer was—seals! There are literally hundreds of them on the western rocks. The rocks take strange forms here as they often do on the Pacific coast. One looks like a loaded camel, and near it is one resembling a kneeling camel.

Did you ever go up in a lighthouse? I climbed up Round Island Lighthouse, and mighty interesting I found it. The men on duty receive letters only once in three months when the supply ship arrives, but they have a radio and a good library and seem happy and contented.

The Isle of Tresco is perhaps the most interesting. Eucalyptus, banana, and pepper trees grow here, as well as other plants from nearly every country on the globe. One of the two villages on Tresco was a stronghold of smugglers in olden times. "Pipers Hole" is an old smuggling cache. They say that this hole extends right under Tresco. If this is so, the smugglers must have had a glorious game of hide and seek with the excisemen.

All the islands are beautiful, and it's wonderful to be up on the moors with the keen, salt air on your cheek, with all the ocean as your view and the wild things the only life near you. CHRISTINE CHAFFER.

"Paparoas," 46 Redlands Road, Reading, Berkshire, England.

Daughter of an old-timer.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: After two years in New York and vicinity I am back on the farm! I went East for educational purposes, and after one year of preparatory school decided upon a "stage career." My father decided otherwise, so here I am and my head's plumb full of meanness.

I am nineteen years old, one-quarter Choctaw Indian. I've traveled all my life and been in thirty-two different States and the Bahamas. I can ride anything any of you hombres will lasso! Kentucky grows some real horseflesh, you know.

This fall or winter, I expect to tour through to Arizona with my daddy. Daddy was reared in the West, and he is famous now for his "quick draw" and hip-shooting.

Well, I'll leave the herd for a while and canter in. Will some one who knows dogs tell me what to do for a five-months-old pup with distemper? Thanks.

NATACHEE SCOTTE.

Care of Earl Webb Farm,
Guthrie, Kentucky.

Over the wilderness trails south of the Siskiyou country the old-timers trek by pack horse and mule. Trinity County is the stamping ground of the prospector and the miner. The friend-maker badge will introduce you to these old-time prospectors of the West.

Twenty-five cents in coin or stamps sent to The Hollow Tree Department, Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City, will bring you either the pin style or the button for the coat lapel. In ordering, be sure to state which you wish.

Looking for a Pal.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: I am a boy of seventeen and I live in the city of Minneapolis. Living in the city at times is all right, but it gets mighty boring for one who likes the outdoors. I would appreciate it very much if I could have a Pen Pal of my own age.

BUDDY.

Care of The Tree.

Cowboy country.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: I sure enjoy reading WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE. It has such nice, clean interesting stories that thrill you from beginning to end.

I know what the cowboy life is, for I've just come from my uncle's ranch in San An-

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gelo, Texas. I can't stay away from the cow country. I'm headed now for Parker, Arizona, where I'll work for one of my buddies—on the ranch. TOM LEDFORD.
2831 Waughtown Street, Salem-Winston, North Carolina.

South Sea Islands.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: I'd like to hear from Gangsters who can give me information about the South Sea Islands, as I am planning to go there soon. Will be very grateful for any information you can help me obtain.
PATRICK MCGEE.
275 Warren Street, Brooklyn, New York.

Territory of Hawaii.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: I am a soldier from the South, twenty-two years old. I get rather lonesome at times and would love to have Pen Pals from everywhere. I will answer all letters and exchange snapshots.
PRIVATE R. J. WALKER.
Second Chemical Company, Schofield Barracks, Honolulu, Territory of Hawaii.

Bear Mountain Bridge.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: I live near the famous Bear Mountain Bridge, also Stony Point and Haverstraw. Does any one care to hear about these places? I will exchange snaps, views and curios with you-all.

If any one is interested, I'll tell them all about myself and the place in which I live. I surely would like to hear from girls of the Old Hollow. BLANCHE GILLHAM.
Jones Point, New York.

Maine Gangster.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: I read the WESTERN STORY fiction and also the letters from the members, for I am very much interested in your Hollow Tree.

I would like all those who are interested in collecting stamps, old money, et cetera, also in sports, to write to me. I live in Maine, am sixteen years old, and I want both old and young to write. Here's hoping that I get a boxful of letters. IDA DEVOE.
108 Silver Street, Waterville, Maine.

Looking for a Western pard.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: I would like to have a real Westerner or a lonely trapper of the North for a pard. I am nineteen and would like to hear from some one who is five or ten years older. I will gladlly exchange snaps and can tell many interestng tales of New York and Chicago in exchange for true yarns of a born rancher or trapper.
BILL JENSEN.
2838 West North Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Trekking Westward.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: I'm no cow-puncher, but a gas shovel and crane operator, and I would like to hear from some one around the Boulder Dam project or from any one who can tell me about similar large constructive projects operating in the Western States. Don't pass this one up, pards. Will answer all who write. H. M. JOHNSON.
Care of The Tree.

Homeseekers.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: I am an elderly man, all alone, no children and no kin. I am not dependent, have a grubstake, and can work, but I am hard of hearing and cannot live alone very well. I would be glad of an opportunity to make my home with some congenial Western folks, the kind that love the great outdoors, somewhere in the great Southwest—Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Colorado. Would be willing to grubstake in any way I could, in any proposition offering a livelihood and a good time with the right kind of folks. J. B. JOHNSON.
429 West Eleventh Street, Kansas City, Missouri.

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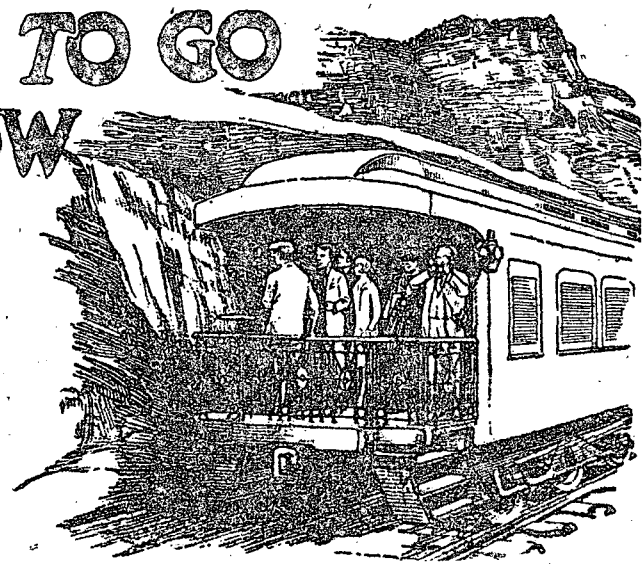
WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE



by John North

It is our aim in this department to be of genuine practical help and service to those who wish to make use of it. Don't hesitate to write to us and give us the opportunity of assisting you to the best of our ability.

Address all communications to John North, care of WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

THE good old State of New Mexico is famed for many things, but the attraction that is luring Ralph F., of Baltimore, to its borders, is the fact that outdoor life may be enjoyed there to the full. "I'm planning on spending some time in the near future on a ranch, Mr. North," writes this hombre, "and I'd like to hear about some outfits down in New Mexico. This State, with its high mountains and wide plains, appeals to me as the right place to acquire a coat of tan. Also it seems to me to retain more of the romance of the old days when it was given over entirely to the cattlemen and sheepmen than any other State. What outfit would you recommend?"

Well, we'll say that is putting it up to us! There are so many dude ranches down in the Sunshine State that it's hard to pick one from the list. There is, for instance, the San Gabriel, located in the historic settlement of Plaza del Alcade, halfway between Santa Fe and Taos. This outfit has much to offer the tenderfoot or dude, for it is a convenient starting point for every variety of trip in that region of the Southwest.

Ralph could not but be pleased with the surroundings of this outfit, for the valley in which the ranch stands reaches away for many miles between two ranges of the high Rockies. On the east towers the Sangre de Cristo, while the Jemez range lifts its crests skyward on the west. Right down the center of the valley flows the famous Rio Grande del Norte, along whose banks so much of the thrilling history of the Southwest has been staged. And on an elevated area between the river and mountains lies the Pajarito Plateau, with cliff dwellings and prehistoric ruins by the thousand.

If Ralph is interested in the Indians of the Southwest, he need only journey a short distance from the ranch to see weird Indian ceremonials, view native women making pottery, and watch the Mexicans weaving colorful blankets.

Then there is the Valley Ranch, lo-

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cated at the post office of that name, which is twenty-eight miles east of Santa Fe and seven miles from Glorieta. This outfit is also open all the year round, and likewise offers beautiful surroundings and many recreational advantages. Eighteen miles from Las Vegas is the El Porvenir Ranch, another year-round outfit, located in the Rocky Mountains. Here in the midst of the Santa Fe National Forest, at an elevation of seven thousand three hundred feet, Ralph would find a sunny and invigorating climate. Five miles south of Las Vegas is the Thunderbird Ranch, where in addition to the usual cowboy activities, the guests find much excitement in washing the gold-bearing alluvial soil of the region for precious metal.

Another New Mexican outfit which cannot be omitted from the list is Morley's Ranch, located in the midst of one of the remaining wildernesses of the Southwest. This outfit stands just under the Continental Divide, and the range extends many miles along it on each side. This ranch has from three to five thousand cattle on it and requires two chuck wagons going from June until December to brand over the range and gather steers for market.

And last but not least is the Double S Ranch, which is situated fifty miles northwest of Silver City, within the boundaries of the Gila National Forest. In this forest the guest will find trout streams, box canyons, cliff dwellings, and ancient stone-house ruins. As Ralph can see from this layout, he will have no difficulty in finding an outfit down in the Sunshine State that will provide just what he is looking for.

And to have our difficulties satisfactorily settled is something that all of us look forward to. "Red" F., of Springfield, Massachusetts, confesses that he is having troubles of his own in locating a place where he wants to stay put. "I've been roaming around the United States for a considerable time now, Mr. North," writes this Yankee, "and I'm good and ready to settle down. But I haven't been able to pick just the right spot yet. Some yarns I've heard about the town of Armstrong, British Columbia, make me feel that it might fill the bill. I'd be glad to hear anything you may have to say about this town, as I surely don't want to make any mistakes."

From all accounts Armstrong is a mighty attractive little town of about one thousand population, with two thousond more folks in the municipality that surrounds it. It is ideally situated in the center of the richest mixed farming district in the interior of British Columbia, fifteen miles north of Vernon, on the Okanogan-Cariboo scenic highway. The Canadian Pacific Railway runs through the town, and the Canadian National Railway has completed construction from Kamloops through to the city of Kelowna. This opens up some additional good territory, rich in timber and minerals, which Red might be interested in looking over. There are also great gypsum deposits ready for develpment twenty-four miles west of Armstrong.

This Canadian town has a wonderful supply of pure water, as well as an electric light system, both facilities extending to many of the surrounding farms. Fall wheat, alfalfa, fruit, dairying, and hog raising are the most extensive lines of farming. The local creamery makes close to four hundred thousand pounds of butter per year.

Altogether, we believe that Red might find Armstrong well worth a little investigation. And these are evidently just the sentiments of Ray D., of Chester, Pennsylvania, in regard to one of Uncle Sam's irrigated projects about which he is making some inquiries. "For a long time now I've been seriously thinking of giving up city life and moving out to one of the government irrigation pro-

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jects, Mr. North. The one in which I'm specially interested is the Milk River Project out in Montana, and I'd welcome any information which you could give me on this subject, as to climate, soil, industries, and towns."

We also welcome this opportunity to talk about this Western project. The Milk River Project is located in northeastern Montana, about fifty miles south of the Canadian boundary, in the vicinity of Glasgow and Malta. Temperatures out that way climb to one hundred degrees in summer, and drop to forty below zero in winter. However, the winters are not as severe as Ray might expect, and stock ordinarily graze in the open all winter. Naturally, there is a short growing period, but it is favorable for rapid plant growth, owing to the long summer days. The average elevation is two thousand two hundred feet.

According to the last government report we had on this project, the reclamation bureau is prepared to serve about ninety-six thousand acres, half of which is irrigated. Good land can be bought very cheaply. With a few exceptions, the soil of the Milk River Valley is fine in texture. Along the river it is classed as silt loam or fine sandy loam. Away from the river it gradually changes into a finer-textured loam or clay, and more remotely into a soil known as gumbo. The silt loam is highly productive and easy to work. The intermediate type is also productive, although somewhat refractory, and the gumbo soils are still more difficult and often less productive than the others. These lands occupy a long, narrow strip along the Milk River Valley, and have relatively flat slopes.

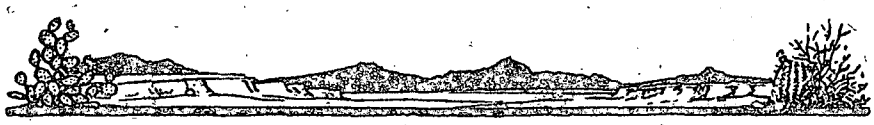
The lands are adapted to diversified farming in holdings of eighty to one hundred acres. Good yields of alfalfa, grains, corn, hardier vegetables, and sugar beets are obtained. Live stock is the principal industry. Beef and dairy cattle, hogs, and sheep are kept. Owing to the long winters, it is necessary to have stock well housed for the best results. Winter feeding and fattening of stock are engaged in extensively on the project. Northern and eastern Montana are suited to grazing during the summer season, when the plains are covered with native grasses. The summer herds of the prairies consume the hay of the irrigated districts.

There are three flour mills, three creameries, a seed-growers' association, and a hay-growers' association on the project. The main line of the Great Northern Railway passes through the project in an easterly and westerly direction. Towns or sidings are located at distances of five to six miles along the line. The Roosevelt International Highway parallels the railway.

As to markets for produce, much of the native blue-joint hay goes west to the lumber camps of Idaho and Washington, whereas most of the alfalfa and all of the corn crops are fed locally to live stock. Local markets consume all the dairy and poultry products.

The principal project towns are Chinook, Harlem, Dodson, Malta, Saco, Hinsdale, Glasgow, and Nashua, all of which have electric lights, water, and sewers. The farm population amounts to about one thousand one hundred, but there is space for more.

There is not room for more discussion of this project to-day, however, but I shall be glad to tell all of you hombres who are interested where additional information may be obtained.



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MISSING

This department conducted in duplicate in DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE and WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE, thus giving readers double service, is offered free of charge to our readers. Its purpose is to aid them in getting in touch with persons of whom they have lost track.

While it will be better to use your name in the notice, we will print your request "blind" if you prefer. In sending "blind" notices, you must, of course, give us your right name and address, so that we can forward promptly any letters that may come for you. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable. Because "copy" for a magazine must go to the printer long in advance of publication, don't expect to see your notice till a considerable time after you send it.

If it can be avoided, please do not send us a "General Delivery" post-office address, for experience has proved that those persons who are not specific as to address often have mail that we send them returned to us marked "not found." It would be well, also, to notify us of any change in your address.

Now, readers, help those whose friends or relatives are missing, as you would like to be helped if you were in a similar position.

WARNING.—Do not forward money to any one who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking.

CAMPBELL, CHRIS and **CHRISTINE.**—Formerly of Granby, Missouri. Last heard from in Galena, Kansas, in February, 1929. Information appreciated by A. J. Dollinger, 461 Lyell Avenue, Rochester, New York.

KENNETH.—How could you leave me? I will always have faith in you. Please write to Billie, care of this magazine.

WALL, HOMER.—Last heard from in a lumber camp in Oregon. Please write to Sam Bayette, 2301 North I Street, Fort Smith, Arkansas.

BROWN, ELIZABETH S.—Moved from Hollandale, Mississippi, in 1925. Information appreciated by John C. Marsh, Box 2, Estill, Mississippi.

AL and **EDDIE.**—Al was last heard from in South Dakota, and Eddie in Michigan. Please write to your brother, J. B. S., care of this magazine.

ELLIS, CLINTON E.—Five feet ten inches tall, light-brown hair, gray eyes, and weighs about one hundred and sixty-eight pounds. Information appreciated by his wife and baby, care of this magazine.

BLACKIE H.—Return to duty at once. Please write to Father, care of this magazine.

L. J. G.—Will cause you no trouble, but want to get in touch with you. Please write to Emma, care of this magazine.

DAVIS, CHARLEY.—Brother of Anna Davis Honius. Last heard from in Newport, Arkansas, twelve years ago. Information appreciated by his niece, Mrs. Edith Honius Rukeyser, 5406 Winthrop Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

NOTICE.—When I was about a year old, in 1903, I was brought to Zion, Illinois, by a man named Walters or Waters and an elderly lady named Delashmitt. I would like to know something about my people. Address Betty, care of this magazine.

VAILES, HILLARD.—Five feet eleven inches tall, brown hair, and blue eyes. Has a small scar under one eye. Information appreciated by Mrs. Theresa Vailes, Nitla, West Virginia.

PRITCHARD, ALBERT.—Born in November, 1901. His father, Edwin Pritchard, was killed in a mine fire, in January, 1902. Albert's mother later married a farmer. In 1910 they moved to Texas, and have not been heard from since. Information appreciated by his uncle, John Pritchard, Midland, Arkansas.

OWENS, VERNUS.—Last heard from in Mississippi. Believed to be in Ohio. Have very important news for him. Information appreciated by an old friend, Dan H., care of this magazine.

THOMPSON, ELMER L.—Last heard from in Valier, Montana, in 1924. Information appreciated by his nephew, Clyde Walton, Route 2, Wenatchee, Washington.

NELSON, FRANCIS DE LEE.—Please write to your cousin, C. Nelson Godfrey, Route 2, Bussey, Iowa.

SMITH, MRS. WILLIAM LESLIE.—Formerly of Youngstown, Ohio. Information appreciated by M., care of this magazine.

FANNIE.—A friend of William Leslie Smith. Last heard from in Zanesville, Ohio. Information appreciated by M., care of this magazine.

BRAY, HENRY E.—Your father died June 17th. Please write to your people, at Grafton; your signature is needed. B. R. B., care of this magazine.

STROMGREN, HENRY EDWARD.—Forty-eight years old. Six feet one inch tall and has light hair. Last heard from in Brookston, Minnesota, in 1924. Information appreciated by A. Fryle, Estevan, Saskatchewan, Canada.

POPE, WILEY.—Eighty-five years old. Last heard from in Denver, Colorado, about forty-eight years ago. My mother is his daughter, by his second wife, Sarah Brokefield. Information appreciated by his granddaughter, Gladys Johnson, Dufur, Oregon.

BROOKS, LYDIA, nee **McCAGHEN,** and **JIM McCAGHEN.**—Last heard from in New Mexico. Information appreciated by E. F. Brooks, Box 484, East Columbia, Texas.

GRIFFIN, HENRY.—Please write to Louise, 1221 Queen Anne Avenue, Seattle, Washington.

BLACKWELL, ROSE and **EARL.**—My letter to you at St Joe returned. Please write to Elsie Taroshausky, care of this magazine.

BRYSON, HARRY A.—Believed to be in Uniontown or Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Information appreciated by L. Dick, care of this magazine.

FOLSOM, ARLAND S.—Thirty-one years old. Was in the air service overseas, during the World War. Last heard from in Butte, Montana, about six years ago. Information appreciated by his niece, Mrs. Josephine Stone, Route 7, Peoria, Illinois.

ELLEFOON, GARNET.—Was in Seattle, in 1928. Do you remember the curly haired electrician's mate? If you do, please write to Ray Stevenson, care of this magazine.

NOTICE.—Would like to hear from a woman by the name of Nellie, believed to be in Tennessee, about fifty-four years old. Was on the Pacific coast for a while. Address Mrs. D. E. Lyon, Grants Pass, Oregon.

WILBUR, JAMES.—Last heard from in Racine, Wisconsin. Do you remember school days in Grayling, Michigan? Please write to Florence, care of this magazine.

DANIELS, GRAYDON F.—Six feet one inch tall, brown eyes, and weighs about one hundred and fifty pounds. Information appreciated by his mother and wife, 606 South Broadway Street, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

WILLARD, LEIGE.—About sixty years old. Last heard from in Oilton, Oklahoma, twelve years ago. Information appreciated by his daughters, Irsel, Jewel, and Edna, care of this magazine.

BAKER, WILLIAM.—Of Frisco and Los Angeles. Please write to Box 633, Seattle, Washington.

AILMEN or **ALEMEN, MARY.**—Worked in Seattle, Washington, about five years ago. Please write to Willard Sigler, 7003 Sixteenth Avenue, N. W., Seattle, Washington.

BAINBRIDGE, MRS. EFFIE MYRICH.—Your son, who was left in the Bethany Home, Rock Island, Illinois, would like to hear from you. Please write to John L. Holt, Manly, Iowa.

DERR, SAM A.—Please write to your sister, Mrs. L. R. Smith, R. R. 2, Clio, Michigan.

TOM B.—Please write to your sister Rose at once. Amelia, care of this magazine.

DeFLOON, SVEN, or **ALLEN GRANSTROM.**—Born in Sweden, twenty-eight years ago. Five feet seven inches tall, brown hair, blue eyes. Last heard from in Paris, in the fall of 1922. Information appreciated by P. R. Colbeet, Dallafrance, Nice, France.

THOMAS, GEORGE or **TOMMY.**—Last heard from in Nelson, British Columbia. Information appreciated by his mother, Mrs. A. Thomas, 1021 Ontario Avenue, Niagara Falls, New York.

WALKER, SAVILL HUGH.—Your brother, Robert Walker, of Fort Collins, Colorado, died in September, 1928. Information appreciated by Andrew Walker, 500 North Garfield Avenue, Janesville, Wisconsin.

DENNO, ALEX.—Last heard from in Billings, or Henderson, Montana, eighteen years ago. Information appreciated by Sister, care of this magazine.

SCOTT, ELIZABETH MAY.—Information appreciated by her sister, Mrs. Alice Scott Hawkins, Route 2, Jackson, Michigan.

NOTICE.—I was left in a rooming house, in Brooklyn, New York, when I was a baby. The name of Mary Halstead was written on paper and pinned to my dress. Information concerning my people will be appreciated by Mary Halstead, care of this magazine.

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SHEPHARD, DENZIL RAY.—Information appreciated by his mother, Mrs. Alice Murrell, 2219 McKinley Avenue, North Fort Worth, Texas.

BENE, MRS. CORINE.—Twenty-two years old. Last known address was care of L. O. McCutcheon, R. F. D. 2, Scranton, South Carolina. Information appreciated by John E. Gaylard, Second Battalion, Seventeenth F. A., Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

MOODY, B. G.—Baby is three years old and needs you. Please write to Margaret, 110 Smith Street, Mount Clemens, Michigan.

BOWNS, EARL and **MYRTLE.**—Please write to Aaron C. Ried, Box 221, Benson, Arizona.

FISHER, LOVETT.—Born in S. W. Port Moulon, Nova Scotia, Canada. Last seen in Gloucester, Massachusetts, where he lived with his sister, Edna Daury, who is now critically ill. Information appreciated by his brother-in-law, J. D. Daury, 1946 East Fourth Street, Los Angeles, California.

BARRY, GEORGE F.—Lived in Gordon, Wisconsin, from 1891 to 1901. Last seen in Lincoln, Nebraska, with the Ringland Bros. Information appreciated by B. P. M., care of this magazine.

TAYLOR, CARL.—I love you, and am heartbroken. Forgive me. Please write to Hazel, care of this magazine.

AKINS, NICHOLS LEO.—Born in February, 1912, at Keota, Oklahoma. Five feet eight inches tall, light-brown hair, gray-blue eyes, and weighed one hundred and fifty-eight pounds when last seen. Left Partales, New Mexico, in June, 1929, en route to Oklahoma. Information appreciated by his father, A. D. Akins, Coney, Kansas.

CLARK, JAMES W.—Sixty years old. Six feet tall. Information appreciated by Betsy Clark, 226 Washington Avenue, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

BRYANT, GEORGE.—Five feet nine inches tall and weighs about one hundred and seventy-five pounds. When last seen, in Los Angeles, was driving a Chevrolet touring car. Information appreciated by D., care of this magazine.

WORTHINGTON, MRS. MINNIE.—I left Oilton, Oklahoma, before you did, and wrote to you from Colorado, but my letter was returned. Please write to your friend, Lela Clemons, R. R. A., Lakin, Kansas.

WILSON, MRS. LIZZIE.—Last heard from in Cushing, Oklahoma. Please write to your friend, Lela Clemons, R. R. A., Lakin, Kansas.

LONG, JOHN, wife **REBECCA,** and son **JOHN.**—Lived in Richmond, Indiana; Eaton and New Paris, Ohio, between 1868 and 1885. Originally from eastern Pennsylvania. Information appreciated by a relative, Lonely, care of this magazine.

SCOUT, ANNA.—Twenty-four years old. Irish, and has red hair. Worked at Allentown, Pennsylvania, in a hospital, in 1920. Remember the girl who ate with you during April, May and June? And the roses you brought her while she was ill? Please write to Lonely, care of this magazine.

FRANKS, IRA.—Five feet five inches tall, light-brown hair and blue eyes. Last seen at Leavenworth, Kansas, in 1922. Had his wife, and two daughters, Opal and Ruby, with him. Information appreciated by his daughter, Rose, care of this magazine.

BAZMERIOSKY, MARY, STELLA, EDWARD, BENNIE, and **JOHN.**—My sisters and brothers. We lived in Brooklyn, New York. Mother died just before the World War, and I was placed in N. Y. C. P. School, in 1914. My married sister, Mary Malecka, lived at that time at 105 North First Street, Brooklyn, New York. Information appreciated by Mrs. Elvina Lyons, 1434 North Wood Street, Chicago, Illinois.

BOYLE, ELLEN.—Born at Birdhill, Tipperary, Ireland, in 1825. Would like to hear from relatives of the above. Information appreciated by J. O'C., care of this magazine.

MADDOX, A. W., and **NEVILLE KOCK.**—Formerly of the U. S. S. "Fox." Information appreciated by J. M. K., care of this magazine.

CYNAR or **SYNOR, JOHN.**—About forty-five years old. Left Harrah, Oklahoma, about fourteen years ago. Was in the Marines or the Army overseas during the World War. Returned to the States. Has not been heard from since. Information appreciated by his brother, George J. Synor, 55th Second Battalion, 11th Regiment, Yale, Nicaragua.

DE LORIA, BEN.—Last heard from in Tacoma, Washington. Information appreciated by George Horton, Lake City, Kansas.

PERRY, HARRY.—Last heard from in Oakland, California. Information appreciated by George Horton, Lake City, Kansas.

HORTON, GEORGE and **STANLEY.**—Last heard from in Washington. Information appreciated by George Horton, Lake City, Kansas.

GERTIE R.—Last heard from in Snohomisk, Washington. Information appreciated by George Horton, Lake City, Kansas.

LONGENECKER, WILLIAM.—Six feet tall, blond hair and blue eyes. Was a private in the barracks at Presidio of San Francisco, California, in 1924. Information appreciated by Hattie Angelina Braan, 1866 Union Street, San Francisco, California.

DE ANJOU, WALLACE W.—Eighty-three years old. Five feet ten inches tall, white hair and beard, weighed about one hundred and seventy-five pounds. Left Albany, May 3, 1929. Believed to be in New York City. Information appreciated by Mrs. Eva M. Scudder, North Sanford, New York.

MINCER, TOM.—Worked in the Manhattan Pool Hall, in Los Angeles, California, about three years ago. Information appreciated by his sister, Mrs. M. F. Brown, Box 195, Sasakwa, Oklahoma.

GIBBONS, WILLIAM.—Fifty-five years old. Five feet nine inches tall, weighs about one hundred and fifty pounds. Blue eyes and black hair. Native of Indiana. A schoolteacher. Last known address in March, 1926, was 615 North Wells Street, Chicago, Illinois. Information appreciated by C. Stites, Park Hotel, Omaha, Nebraska.

JOHNSON, J. H.—Last heard from in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1912. Information appreciated by his sister, Ida Brumby, Blalack, Arizona.

BRINK, ALLEN L.—Last heard from in Hartford, Connecticut. We know everything, and wish you all the luck in the world. Why not come back to your friends? Please write to J. H. C., Butler, Pennsylvania.

SHORT, GEORGE A.—Remember the night in October, 1928, at Cloverdale, California, and J. and L.? Please write to Evelyn Manley, 420 Mission Avenue, Tahlequah, Oklahoma.

SANFORD, HARRY NAPIER.—Left Charleston, West Virginia, several years ago, for the West. Was working in Idaho, in 1926. Believed to have gone to Texas. Information appreciated by his cousin, Mrs. J. F. Penrod, Box 116, Oak Hill, West Virginia.

FLOOD, RICHARD.—Sixty-nine years old. Five feet eleven inches tall, weighed one hundred and seventy-five pounds. Was in the real estate and oil business in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Amarillo, Texas. Information appreciated by F. M., care of this magazine.

RUTLER, CHARLES D.—Fifty-six years old. Married Ella Clark in August, 1898. She died, in Chicago, in 1901, leaving a two-year-old son. This son was left by his father with a family named Keane, on Wabash Avenue, Chicago, and later turned over by them to the Juvenile court. From there he was sent to the Illinois Children's Home and Aid at Rantoul, Illinois. He was taken from there by a family in Alton. Recently he heard that his father had been in St. Louis, the year of the Fair; and seen in Texas, in 1920. Information concerning him appreciated by the son's wife, Mrs. Charles Rutler-Chambers, 5358 South State Street, Chicago Illinois.

SANFORD, HARRY.—Have important news concerning your mother. Please write to William E. Harter, 507 Grandwell Avenue, Elmira, New York.

LAMBERT, WALTER.—Still waiting for you. Please write to Elsie Lambert, 814 East Hudson Street, Urbana, Illinois.

SOMERS, CLARENCE.—Forty-five years old. Five feet seven inches tall, medium weight and dark complexion. Formerly of Los Angeles, California. Had a brother, Clem. Worked at Lenope Mine, in Searchlight, Nevada, in 1910. Last heard from near Taft or Bakersfield, California. Information appreciated by G. W. L., care of this magazine.

MURPHY, C. PAT, and wife.—Believed to be in Oklahoma. Remember Honeymoon, in Hialeah? Please write to Bodie, care of this magazine.

COTTLE, CHARLES.—Five feet seven inches tall, weighed about one hundred and seventy pounds, ruddy complexion, and bald. Wore glasses. Was instructor in shop work and mechanical drawing, at Polytechnic High School, Los Angeles, California, during the years 1914 to 1918. Last heard of in Los Angeles, California. Information appreciated by an old pupil, G. W. L., care of this magazine.

RIDDELL, J. G.—Is blind, and one hand is off at the wrist. In October, 1918, was living with people by the name of Wilson, at 954 Fourteenth Avenue, West, Detroit, Michigan. Information appreciated by his son, T. G. Riddell, 697 William Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.

ROBERTS, JACK.—Who had a special notice in this magazine, in June, 1929. Please write, and send photograph or snap to W. D. Frost, 1615 Bay Street, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.

LOVE, WALTER S.—Are you lonesome? I am. Your silence is breaking my heart. Am at the same place. Please write to Chubby, care of this magazine.

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ANGEL FACE — Vivian Grey
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THE GIRL AT THE STAGE DOOR — Beulah Poynter
THUNDER BRAKES — Cherry Wilson
HAUNTED BELLS — Madeleine Sharps Buchanan
BANDITS OF BALD HILL — G. W. Barrington
RED PEARLS — Merlin Moore Taylor
NICE GIRL — Vivian Grey
DECEIVER'S DOOR — Christopher B. Booth
SQUATTERS' RIGHTS — George M. Johnson
BLACK SKIN AND BROWN — Don Waters
THE ROAD TO BROADWAY — Ellen Hogue and Jack Bechdolt
JUDY THE TORCH — Arthur P. Hankins
WHITE WOLF'S LAW — Hal Dunning

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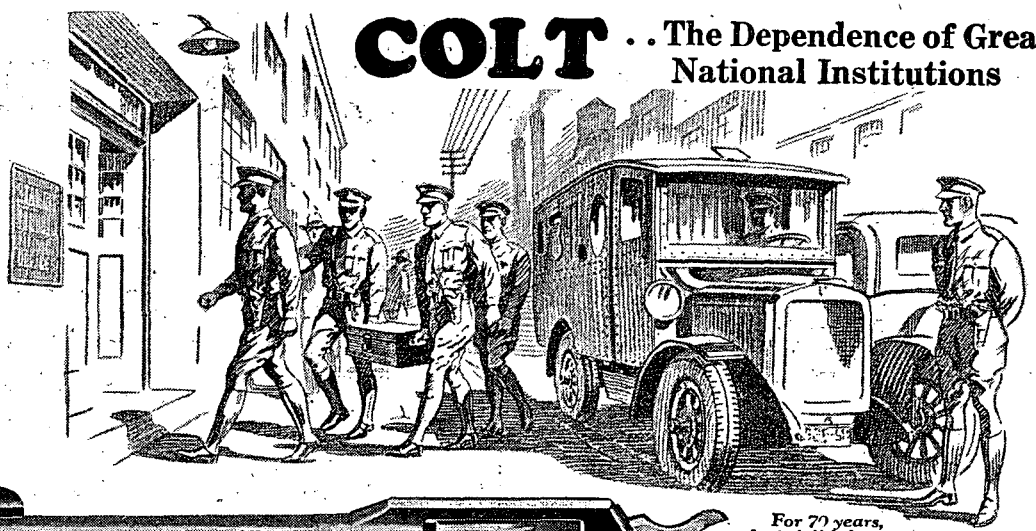

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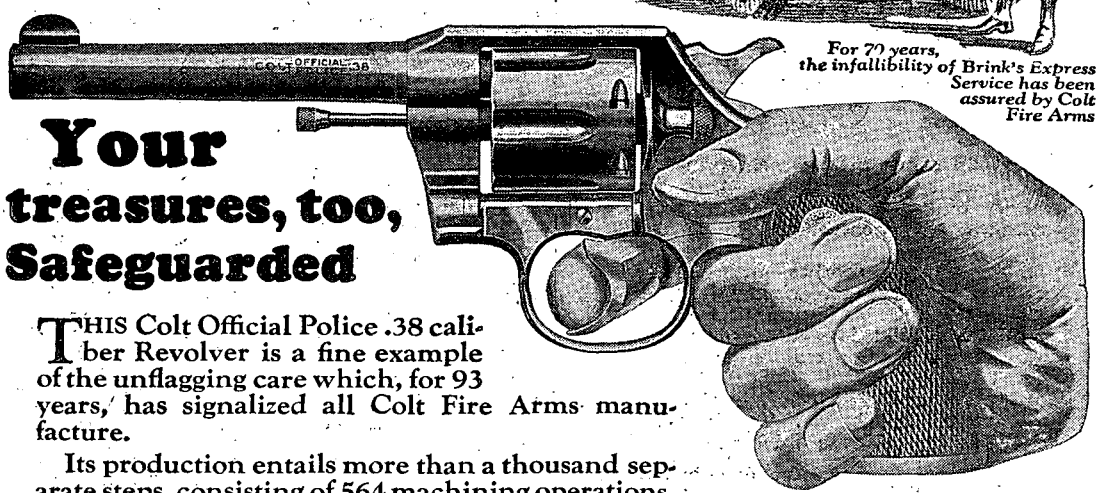

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